

On the Radio with Michael McGee

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Abstract The following interview took place live on air on April 15, 2003, at WNOV radio in Milwaukee. I interviewed Michael McGee, a former leader of the Milwaukee branch of the Black Panther Party. McGee also founded the Black Panther Militia in Milwaukee in the late 1980s.

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Andrew Witt (AW): How do you think the Black Panther Party has been characterized over the years and why?

Michael McGee (MM): They been characterized as a violent type organization. But really, the BPP was about building the community...coming up with programs. The gun thing...even though that was something that was mainly done to attract younger Blacks from the community who were tired of that 'turn the other cheek' philosophy, so I would say that was a ploy or a gimmick really. Because that was low, low, low on the agenda of the Black Panther Party...and the guns weren't meant to be used in an offensive way. We weren't going to commit violence against the community or engaging in terrorism. It really was about picking up the hammer. We used to say we used to pick up the hammer more than we did the gun. The gun was mainly for self-defense.

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AW: What made you interested in joining the Party?

MM: The most appealing thing about the Party was the image of Black men actually taking a stand. I always thought of the Civil Rights Movement as being a real wimp type of movement. Letting someone beat you up; I never was in to that. Even when I was in high school I didn't like those marches where you would do the non-violent thing and get sprayed with water hoses or have dogs sicked on you. I always like the image of the stand-up type of Black man. But, more than that, when I finally read the Black Panther newspaper when I was in Vietnam, and the main thing....First of all, the newspaper was a first rate newspaper. They had relevant stuff from my point of view as a Black person. And then when I started to read about the kind of programs they offered, that's what really got me interested, because that was really a way to serve the community, because I had promised myself that when I got home from Vietnam I would do something to help the community. I saw this as a way of doing that...doing their survival (community) programs.

AW: Ok. The Panthers initially made inroads into Milwaukee in 1969 but 11 months later they were driven out of existence for a variety of reasons ranging from police persecution to internal dissension. But then you all came back....

MM: Right, that was after I got out of the military in 1971. We organized the Party because of course, the time (1969) that you're talking about, the Milwaukee Three had been arrested. Booker Collins, Jesse White and Earl Levrettes had got arrested for supposedly trying to murder a policeman and they also had a lot of internal conflicts in the Party, so when I got back I found some of the original members and I got with them to reorganize the Party. So what we did was organize the People's Committee for Survival.

AW: And that was in 1972?

MM: Yeah, and what we did was we talked to the people (national leadership of the Party) in Oakland and they said before we could come back as an organization in Milwaukee we had to have a probationary period...we had to prove that the Party was really committed to being back here. So after we did that we had Bobby Rush (leader of the Illinois chapter), who supervised us and we did a little training and then they awarded us our charter and the Black Panther Party was back in Milwaukee again.

AW: Where was your headquarters located?

MM: Down on 3rd Street, 2500 block.

AW: So when you were establishing your headquarters did you have any trouble renting from landlords?

MM: No, we didn't really have that problem in Milwaukee, because the guy who was the landlord was a pretty radical guy himself. In fact, he was a member of the Republic of New Africa.

AW: What communities in Milwaukee were you most active in serving?

MM: Over on the East side of Milwaukee. Except when we were selling our newspaper, which we had about a circulation of 3000 in Milwaukee. We used to

sell those all over. But mainly our base was on the East side, that's where most of our programs were based.

AW: Did you have your own local Black Panther newspaper that you were selling in Milwaukee, or was it the national paper?

MM: No, we had the paper delivered every week from Oakland, and we would drive to Chicago to pick them up.

AW: Did you ever run into difficulties with picking up the newspapers?

MM: A couple times we had problems, that's why we had to go pick them up ourselves directly from Chicago, because when we had them shipped to Milwaukee we had a few instances where they disappeared; we never even got them. So every week someone had to take the task of driving the 180 miles roundtrip to get the newspapers.

AW: So we have an idea of when the Panthers came back into existence in Milwaukee, and where they were located, but what was your role within the branch?

MM: I was the Coordinator.

AW: What were you responsible for?

MM: I was responsible for selling the newspapers, running of the programs, and the fundraising.

AW: How did you raise money for the programs?

MM: Begging. Just out and out begging. You know, just get a can...we would just call it "canning," and you would have a little label on it that said for the breakfast program, or the busing program, and you just went out and begged. Surprisingly, begging is pretty lucrative especially when you are offering something that people wanted to support. Sometimes I would go out and I might in a day raise \$300, all in dimes and quarters. It would take all day, but you know, that's what you had to do. And then we would get 5 or 6 people doing it...but you know, you had to be good at it. Not everybody could be good at begging. You really have to humble yourself.

And sometimes, we would go up the students in Madison (location of University of Wisconsin) and we would come out of there with a couple thousand dollars. Boy, we would have cans stuffed with money. But the programs were very expensive. And then of course we had to "liberate" some of the stuff we got. By liberate...of course that means retail theft to put it mildly. Because, man, the kids in the Breakfast Program, you didn't want to let them down by not having that breakfast for them anymore.

AW: So that ties into another question I have, because some former Panthers, scholars...have claimed that the Panthers resorted to theft as a primary means of funding their operations, as well as extortion. Did you see this?

MM: Well, no, in Milwaukee we never did get in to the extortion, but I know some chapters did, and that's why a lot of the chapters had to close down. That

was an unscrupulous practice...the theft part of it. I always related it in my mind to Robin Hood; steal from the rich and feed the poor. And it was some serious theft we had to do sometimes, to carry out some of those programs.

AW: Can you elaborate? Who did you steal from?

MM: Grocery stores mainly. Big chain stores, not the small mom and pop stores. And then we would work out deals with someone who worked at National Foods, or something like that, where they would slide some food through and not charge you for it. We talked to them about it, and would say “this isn’t even your property, this is the white man’s. All you got to do is close your eyes and slide some of that meat through there and charge us \$2 or something.”

AW: You mentioned before about how expensive these programs were, like the Breakfast Program. Do you have a rough idea of how much it cost you to run the programs?

MM: Well, because you know, we fed the kids a wholesome breakfast, we didn’t feed them no junk now. We had sausage, eggs, bacon, pancakes, cereal, orange juice, fruit, so I would say it would cost us about \$300 per week to run the Breakfast Program. And then you had to get up at about 5 in the morning to get the breakfasts ready.

First, we ran it in a church, we ran it over on the East side on Richards Street. We started out in a church for the first year, but then all of a sudden the church had this bright idea that we were making money off of the Program, so they drove up the rent. So we moved from there and found this other location...this guy Dennis McDowell had this Access Youth community program and he had some space that he let us use. So we served people out of there, and the Program went on for a good three years before the Party folded here.

AW: Now, backtracking, what was the main objective of the Black Panthers here in Milwaukee?

MM: Well, our main objective were the programs. We really thought that the programs, we used to call them “survival programs,” were also examples of how to actually serve the people. They were experimental programs that we wanted to show could work. We also had a health center, 27th Street People’s Health Center. We had a Busing Program, we had a food program...the thing about that was these were survival programs until people could hopefully do better for themselves. We didn’t plan for them to be institutions, we just wanted to get people over, and also to show the system that there were kids who needed to eat. At that time it was Communistic to say that kids needed to get a breakfast in the morning before they went to school; that was a radical idea.

Other than that, we had sickle-cell anemia testing, or high blood pressure, or lead poisoning screenings. People still don’t understand the prevalence of these problems in our community. And people still don’t get busing to prisons to see their family because people don’t understand how important

it is to keep people in prisons in touch with their family, that's the reason we did the Busing to Prison Program. Now that was the most expensive program.

AW: What did that run you?

MM: Oh boy, see what we did, we did one trip a week, and when we went to Green Bay that cost the most; that was like \$450, because of the bus rental to go up there. We also did visits to the prisons in Fox Lake, Waupun, and those were like \$179 a week. We also went to the prison in Oshkosh. So the Busing to Prisons would cost us about \$600 per month and it was free to the people to go, so like I said, we had to do a lot of begging (to fund it). Every day as a matter of fact.

AW: Did you run into any problems renting the buses for this program?

MM: No, we didn't, because once again it was about economics, if we paid they (the bus company) played.

AW: Why did you feel the need to provide all these various programs?

MM: Because they were not existence. The system at that time was not providing these things. Now, stuff like the Isaac Coggs Health Center (in Milwaukee) is a direct offshoot from the People's Free Health Center. Now, there's more health care available around here, whereas back then there weren't really any health facilities. They had closed the old county emergency hospital, so we didn't have any health care services in the area.

We also actually had dentists, nurses, doctors, who we would ask to come in and help and they would do free exams. And these were mainly white, younger people, who volunteered. Someone like Dr. Schulte, man, he would volunteer his time and go and get us equipment...you know there were a lot of people who wanted to help. All we had to do was provide the facility and pay the rent on the facility. They came in with the equipment and the supplies.

AW: How many days a week was the Health Center open? What hours?

MM: It was open 3 days a week from 3-7 pm. Wednesday was the big day because a lot of doctors had off on Wednesday's. We also had in on Monday's and Friday's. That's when we had doctors and them (nurses) there. But during the week people could come in anytime and do health screenings; we had people trained in how to take blood pressure, the lead poisoning test, sickle-cell anemia test and things like that we could do that all the time because it didn't take a medical doctor or nurse to do those.

AW: How much did it cost to run the Health Center?

MM: Well, the rent was like \$250 a month, and utilities were about another \$100, so about \$350 per month to run that program, because most of the supplies for that program were free, because the doctors provided most of the supplies, and the nurses were liberating things from the different hospitals that they worked at. There was a lot of liberation going on then.

AW: You also mentioned you had a food program?

MM: Yes, we also had a free food program, and in the food program...we gave a bag of groceries to people, and we did that once a week. And we always tried to have some meat in every bag, we wanted some meat in every bag, kind of like a “chicken in every pot?” Well, we wanted a chicken or something in every bag. And like I said those were survival programs, so now when I look and see people bragging about “food for families” going on for 30 years, that ain’t the idea we had. The people should be able to go to the store and buy their own food. We didn’t intend on these programs becoming institutions, now like they’re institutions, where every Christmas you throw a can of food or whatever into some bin for needy families. But we just wanted them to be survival programs where they would carry people until they could do better for their self. You know, the whole concept of teaching people to fish so they can go and catch their own fish.

AW: So we dealt with all these various programs that the Panthers offered and what they cost, so what were you spending monthly on everything altogether?

MM: I would say at least \$1200 a month or more. It made it so we had do a lot of communal living so the members lived together...sometimes 8 or 9 people lived together to make ends meet. We also had community meals so we couldn’t afford for everyone to cook meals on their own, so this was one of the ways we saved money.

AW: You mentioned 8 or 9 living together at a time, but how high did the branch membership get?

MM: At the highest point we had about 50 members, and at the lowest point about 10.

AW: And how would you characterize the membership of the Party? Mainly males? Women?

MM: It was a mixture. We had women. Probably more women than men I would think. We had people who were ex-prostitutes...we would talk to them when distributing the paper, and we would say you could do more to help your community than this and this kind of thing. And then we had people who were students, and then we had some people who worked...like worked for the city, and they would help with contributing almost half their salaries to the Party... people who worked downtown, who worked a lot of places.

AW: Did you have women within the Party within your branch who rose to positions of leadership?

MM: Well in our branch, I made sure, it was one of my personal missions, because the Party said that women were supposed to be equal to men, kind of like Elaine Brown in Oakland. We had Doris Green here, for example. As a matter of fact, Doris was executive secretary down at Boston Store, and she just walked off her job and joined the Party. She was one of the high-ranking members of the organization.

AW: Did you encounter other members within the Party who were just blatantly sexist?

MM: Oh yeah. There's no doubt about that. I think the majority of men were. They used to call me a wimp for supporting the women, and would say 'are you a fag or something?' for supporting the women. Most of the guys didn't like women ordering them around, but within the Party we had a centralized democracy and that rested with me so I made the final decision on these things, so it didn't matter what they (the men) thought. They didn't like it. They bad talked me left and right. You would be surprised how men don't....and later on when we started the Black Panther Militia here it was the same type of thing....and Doris Green is the Deputy Commander of the Militia. And that's something I believe in. Because really, women made a larger contribution to the Party than the men. Because women would work harder than men. The women were just harder workers. They were more serious about their work than the men. The women were the ones who would get up and do the Breakfast Program, for example. I would say women in the Milwaukee branch carried 60% of the load.

AW: You stated you had to deal with sexism within the branch, so did you ever have to suspend or expel anyone for their behavior?

MM: Oh yeah, yeah. No doubt. It was a constant rotation of certain people. I never had to suspend a female the whole time...the males, we suspended them, expelled them, disciplined them, you know, make them stay in their quarters, don't go out because some would go out and get drunk and not be able to do their job the next day. All kind of things.

AW: Roughly how many people do you think you expelled, or disciplined?

MM: Well, I would say...when I said the high point was 50 members, I would say during the course of the Party when you add up the total number of people who came through the branch it might have been 300. I would say the discipline rate was probably actually 20, 20 people who were disciplined or expelled throughout the branch's history.

AW: A common misperception of the Party is that it was anti-white because whites were excluded from membership. How would you characterize the Milwaukee branch? Would you say it was anti-white?

MM: No, it wasn't anti-white, we felt that the organization itself should be only Black people, but we worked with a lot of white groups in the city, like the Revolutionary Union and the Youth's Against the War, and various Socialist organization. I never saw that (anti-white sentiment) from the Party either nationally or locally. Bobby Seale and others did a lot of fundraising from people like Jane Fonda and there were a lot of whites who supported the party. Most of the time white people think that if they ain't in it, that ain't an organization in the first place. They feel they got to have white people in the organization to make it an organization.

AW: How would you characterize the coalitions you had with these other groups that you mentioned? Were they productive?

MM: It was productive. Some of those organizations they used to help us a lot, especially with things like printing our materials. It was a cooperative type effort that we worked together on. And of course there was an Anti-War Movement going on that time that we worked with.

AW: Did you have conflicts with cultural nationalist organizations, like the Panthers in Oakland had with Us?

MM: Well, a lot of those kind of groups that were here, like the Republic of New Africa and things like that had pretty much folded when we were active. So there weren't a lot of cultural nationalists out there in organizations. But there were people who still had the (cultural nationalist) philosophy and mainly our (the Panther's) philosophy was in dealing with the United States, internally. They all believed in a 'back to Africa' type movement. Me, I was never a big fan of that, matter of fact I'm still not.

AW: Now, for you, the Panthers "picked up the gun," so what kind of difficulties did you run into with the FBI and local police?

MM: Well, the head of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), J. Edgar Hoover got it right, he said the number #1 threat to the United States was internal, and it was from the Black community and rightfully so. So man, I got my documents that the FBI had on me in the 1980s and they had pages and pages of stuff. They (law enforcement) were doing all kinds of stuff, they were going to the programs we had, they were backbiting us. Matter of fact back then they had in Milwaukee what was called the 'Red Squad'....Chief (Chief of Milwaukee Police) Harold (Breier) had the Red Squad and their main task was to follow the radicals and keep an eye on them. We caught hell from them. They would come and cut the tires on our vans, all kinds of stuff...burglarize the office...they would snatch you off the street when selling papers....it was just one thing after another. Of course when you get your documents through the Freedom of Information Act, you could really see what they did, you could look at what they did to us, they did all kinds of things like....spread rumors...that was their big thing. They tried to sabotage our relationships with the Nation of Islam, different churches and they went so far as to letters that were supposedly from us.

AW: Did you happen to know or suspect any member of being police informants?

MM: Of course, it was just routine. It was almost so routine that you had to suspect everyone that came in to the branch. I know of at least two people who we discovered who were agents. Then of course, they (the FBI) would sort of help too. I found out one guy, Barry, at the time, that they put him in here so we could murder him because they set up this fool to get uncovered by us. They expected us to kill him, but that was reactionary and I'm not a reactionary person. I still see this one guy, and they threw him away, and he's still walking around in the alley drunk.

AW: Did this or other things lead to internal problems within the Branch?

MM: No, not really. What happened in Milwaukee was...Huey said the Party was going to have to go underground anyway, but what we decided to do was

create a larger organization that the Panther members were a part of, we called it the UBCC, the United Black Community Council. And that way you had people from the Nation of Islam, Republic of New Africa...we decided to create a broader unity organization composed of all these different elements from the community. There were members of the Black Panther Party who didn't like the idea of merging into the larger organization, based on unity, where everyone still had their own philosophy, and they didn't want to unite with these other organizations, and the UBCC....that organization went on for a good ten years.

AW: What brought about the collapse with the UBCC?

MM: At that time, the members of the UBCC eventually tried to co-opt the organization into one philosophy, so we had an ideological struggle over whether or not to just have a single philosophy, and I didn't believe in that. I felt we were Black so we still had that, so it didn't matter if you were Catholic or Baptist...and I didn't go for that. And so that eventually led me to form the Black Panther Militia.

AW: What year was that?

MM: 1989.

AW: And it's still in existence?

MM: Yes. You see, the Black Panther Militia is just that, it was a militia that we would call together in times of emergency. You know, if there was a problem that we needed to work on the members just went and did what they needed to do. For example, if I said we were going to have Militia meeting we could reform at any time. But the Militia is based on the philosophy of the Black Panther Party.