



ROLLING BLACKOUTS (THE BIG HEAT)



By Den Polley

It started on July 10, 1966 in St. Louis, Mo, lasting about three weeks. The Beatles were big and the Vietnam War was in the headlines, dividing the nation. There was no division in Southampton, however, due to a relentlessly cruel, common enemy uniting us all: an unending 100+ degree heat wave, baking and frying houses, businesses, pavements and people.



In those days, at least around here, no one had central air conditioning (AC). The main method of cooling was a window-unit AC. They were big, heavy, dirty and noisy. (My family called ours “the growler.”) These monsters were brutal to install in the double-hung windows. Mounting it in a second-story flat’s window was downright treacherous. I’m sure more than one took the 40-foot plunge to the gangway’s sidewalk below. Window units also required all kinds of bracings and screws resulting in the nice window sills and frames getting all beat up. Most folks had one AC cooling maybe two rooms, often the living and dining rooms which became the heat retreats. Some lucky St. Louisians had two ACs, but not many.



If you didn’t have an AC, the Avalon Theatre and Southtown Famous-Barr were often temporary beat-the-heat destinations. After mixing the Avalon’s chilled interior with a cold soda and real-buttered popcorn, no one really cared about the featured movie. Tickets were a whole 75 cents for adults. Southtown Famous-Barr had three nice restaurants/grills where a tasty meal could be enjoyed in a cool environment.



A big window-mounted electric fan was a faithful backup for the window AC, but not a substitute. We had two double-hung dining room windows in our second-story flat. One had the AC; the other housed the window fan. My Dad had put a new, more powerful motor in ours and it did draw air through the open windows for a good breeze, even though it was a 100 degree breeze. I will say at night, the sound of that fan’s motor and spinning blades was familiar and comforting. I can still hear it.

In response to the unremitting heat, homes and businesses across town had the ACs on full cool and working overtime in early July, 1964. It’s important to remember that window-unit ACs were NOT in any way energy efficient--they drank power like a drunken sailor drinks cheap

beer! The Union Electric (now Ameren) power grid was also sweating big time, struggling to handle the record power demand.



Something was gonna' give, and on July 11, 1966 it did. At 10:30 PM, it was still 100 degrees outside. I remember watching the old movie *Gunga Din*, from 1939, on the Channel 4 Late Show. Cary Grant and the good guys were riding hard to save the day. *Gunga Din*, terribly wounded, climbed to the temple top to blow his bugle as an alarm—and our house on 5040a Devonshire Ave. went belly-up dead.

The TV glowed for an instant, then went black. The AC growled to terrifying halt. All the lights went out. The blades on our fan sat idle. The silence was deafening. Union Electric had initiated area blackouts, combating the huge power demand. In theory, the rolling blackouts were supposed to last about two hours, but that didn't always work out. Case in point, on July 12, 1966, St. Louis went powerless for two days. Remember, there were no computers or iPhones in 1966 for instant updates or online checking, so no one knew when a "rolling" blackout would mercilessly murder their now-beloved window-unit AC or fan.

Whatever cool air was in our second-story house quickly betrayed us and went over to the enemy. My aunt and grandmother lived downstairs, and they soon suffered the same fate. At first, the basement was marginally cooler, but soon it surrendered to the sweltering onslaught.

The neighborhood residents took up arms against the heat employing a variety of ingenious and comical methods. The big cast-iron, claw-foot bathtubs were filled with cold water and whatever ice could be found for aquatic lounging. Folks slept in their basements. Families would spend the night in Christy or Francis Park, hoping to catch some open breezes. Those fortunate enough to have AC in their cars found temporary relief there. (Be careful how much gas you used! No electric equated to no operating gas pumps.)

Let's move over to the 5040a Devonshire Ave., my childhood home. I think my family came up with one of the most creative and funny ways to stay cool. We had one of those above-ground pools, maybe 12 foot in diameter and two foot deep. The old-style, 50-pound solid blocks of ice could still be purchased. My dad picked up about 4 of them and put them into our bathwater-warm pool. The whole family eased into the cooling water. My sister Elaine and I pulled our small, chilled Coke bottles from an iced chest, while my Mom Jean, Dad Cy and my uncle Frank Mueller retrieved frosty Budweisers from the same iced chest. For a while, St. Louis was a pretty good place! (I would give anything to have a picture of that scene. I also wonder if beer sales jumped during the heatwave.)

After about three weeks, to some extent, the big heat relented. The comforting growl of the window-unit AC returned. At night, the big window fan revolved with its welcome, familiar rhythm, drawing in air that wasn't cool, but it sure as heck wasn't 100+.

(If anybody knows how the *Gunga Din* movie ended, would ya' please let me know.) 🤔