

“A FLAMING CROSS”: PENNSYLVANIA,  
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## *Ordeal in Levittown*

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by David B. Bittan

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DOGWOOD HOLLOW was like any other mass-produced suburb on August 11 of last summer—hot, humid and saturated with boredom. Some residents were pushing power mowers. Others, like William E. and Daisy Myers at 43 Deepgreen Lane, were at work indoors. Myers was painting the kitchen woodwork. His wife was busy with a mop.

Dozens of people saw the couple that day and the next. No one paid any attention. Just a painter and a maid, they thought. For, unlike the 60,000 residents of Dogwood Hollow and the other sections of Levittown, in Bucks County, Pa., the Myerses were Negroes. During its first five years, Levittown has assimilated yellow-skinned and red-skinned Americans—but no Negroes.

At 11 a.m. on August 13, Dogwood Hollow housewives began to gather outside the Myers home. Questioning of their mailman had confirmed that Negroes had moved in. By seven, cars were bumper to bumper on Deepgreen Lane. By 10, hundreds of persons spilled over the sidewalk, screaming curses and insults. At midnight, two stones shattered the picture window of the Myers home—and builder William J. Levitt’s dream of the “perfectly planned community.”

Myers, 34, and his wife, 33, both college-educated, had bought the Levittown house from its owner for \$12,150. They had moved from a nearby community that was, in fact, bordered on several sides by expanding Levittown. Friends in Levittown had encouraged them. “We expected some trouble,” said Myers, “but nothing like this.”

For eight straight nights, the mob ruled Dogwood Hollow. It defied township police and state troopers sent by Gov. George M. Leader. Then a stone felled a local policeman. State troopers charged with flailing riot sticks. The mob

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dispersed. But the ordeal of Bill and Daisy Myers had just begun.

This writer, who lives in Dogwood Hollow and covered the violence as a newspaperman, then saw the harassment take a new form. A flaming cross blazed on the lawn of Myers's friend and next-door neighbor, Lewis Wechsler. Another cross was burned outside a friendly Quaker's house. Levittowners shuffled down Deepgreen Lane, clapping hands and walking dogs they called "Nigger." Vile threats were whispered over Myers's telephone. His fire insurance was canceled as a "bad risk." A druggist refused to deliver medicine because his driver was "scared." Tradesmen lost customers for "serving the niggers." Despite a round-the-clock state-police guard, a foot-high "KKK" was painted in red on Wechsler's house.

While Myers went to work as an \$85-a-week equipment tester in a nearby factory, white friends had to stand guard over Mrs. Myers, six-week-old Lynda and their sons, Billy, five, and Stevie, three. Myers's firm resolve to remain in Levittown was shaken only when a vacant house directly behind theirs became a "clubhouse" for the anti-Negro forces. A Confederate flag flew from its rooftop, and a phonograph blared *Old Man River* at all hours. Finally, Myers appealed to State Attorney General Thomas D. McBride.

Moving decisively, McBride ended the war of nerves. He obtained a court order charging eight Levittowners with an "evil conspiracy." (The charge against one was later dropped.) The Bucks County Court was asked to stop them—and anyone else—from harassing the Myerses or their friends. An injunction granted October 23 still is in effect. Since then, not a single incident has been reported. But life is far from perfect for the Myerses. Though more people are friendly, their relations with most of their neighbors are superficial.

How did a vocal minority, a tiny segment of the population, succeed in throwing a peaceful community into turmoil? Observers say it was due in part to the prevailing feeling in the new developments that they can remain white islands; here, homeowners feel, is a step up on the social ladder, not to be shared with Negroes.

The rallying point for the anti-Negro forces was the hastily organized Levittown Betterment Committee. Its executive

committee, whose chairman is James E. Newell, a native of Durham, N.C., voted to contact the Ku Klux Klan for help. A week later, it reversed the vote. Newell was one of those named in the injunction. So was the ex-vice-chairman, who was fined for his part in a cross burning.

Opposing this group was the new Citizens' Committee for Levittown. The Rev. Ray L. Harwick, a 32-year-old Evangelical and Reformed minister, accepted leadership of the committee because of his church's policy on integration and because, he says, "I couldn't look the other way." His committee filled the vacuum of leadership left by the town's established institutions. Only a handful of churchmen spoke up, politicians were singularly silent, and the police were unable to handle the situation.

Because of his stand, Harwick received three a.m. telephone calls, threats signed "KKK" and criticism from some of his congregation. The Quakers and the Jewish community, because they spoke up for the Myerses, were accused of engineering the move-in. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was said to have put up the money. The long-established Levittown Civic Association investigated and found the charges were false.

Criticism was directed by others against Levittown's founder for keeping Negroes out in the first place. Levitt's answer has been: ". . . Most whites prefer not to live in mixed communities. . . . The responsibility [for this] is society's. . . . It is not reasonable to expect that any one builder should or could undertake to absorb the entire risk and burden of conducting such a vast social experiment."

In the original Levittown on Long Island, several Negro families have owned homes, which they bought second-hand. However, the New Jersey Division Against Discrimination is investigating complaints that Levitt is violating a state law in refusing to sell to Negroes in his newest project, near Burlington, N.J.

Levittown, Pa., a year after the Myerses' arrival, has learned that it can live with Negroes. Its worst fears have not been realized. If housing values are down, it is because of the recession. There has been no mass exodus of whites, no influx of

Negroes. A second Negro family moved in without incident late in June.

Organized opposition to the Myerses has collapsed. Some members of the Betterment Committee recently joined in a losing campaign against fluoridation of Levittown's water. Others of this group participated in a losing fight to keep a new high school from being named after J. Robert Oppenheimer. Newell was defeated by a 2-1 margin when he ran for Dogwood Hollow committeeman in May.

Last year's violence has left its mark on Bill and Daisy Myers. But their memories have begun to fade as, more and more, they become a part of Levittown. "Sooner or later," Myers says, "I know we will be accepted for what we are—for ourselves."

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