

## Thirteen

### BATTLE LINES

ONE MORNING IN Levittown, New York, Nassau County judge Paul J. Widlitz stepped up to the stage of the Levittown Theater and looked out into a sea of smiling white faces. The occasion was a fund-raiser for the upcoming Tenth Anniversary Celebration honoring a decade since the first three hundred residents, including Widlitz and his family, moved in. Widlitz was about to unveil a bronze plaque dedicating the theater to the town's lifeblood: the veterans.

"In addition to introducing a new concept of community building," he said, "the Levitt family's objective was a community of homes with ball fields and trees where the harassed GI might take hold of life once more. One decade has seen not only the transformation of potato fields into a teeming, bustling community of seventy thousand people, but also the transition of the harried, uncertain war veteran into a mature husband, father, and responsible resident."

Despite the mounting tensions in Levittown, Pennsylvania, the residents in this sister city did their best to celebrate—and defend—the reputation of Bill Levitt and the suburb known as the "most perfectly planned community in America." Levitt, the master marketer, had established for years how to spin the story. He had billed his community from day one as a dream come true, and himself as the Disney-like dream-maker. Whether naming his town after himself or defying the Supreme Court's stance against racial covenants, he stood unflinchingly behind his product.

Now as he sat on the sidelines of the race riot on Deepgreen Lane, his followers came to his defense. With their tenth anniversary approaching, the original Levittowners went out of their way to show that—despite the critics predictions—the town was something to be proud of. They showed how, despite the assertions that they lived in tacky-tacky boxes, the community in fact valued and cultivated diversity—at least in the design of the homes.

In fact, Alfred Levitt's innovative designs were now paying off. The young, self-taught architect had specifically created these affordable homes to be modified and expanded as the owners' needs changed. He had set houses back off the roads at different angles specifically to accommodate growth. As one writer marveled, "The houses of Levittown appear to have been exactly what their owners needed—a start. Most of the early Levittowners were short on money and long on energy and ingenuity."

The buzzword around town was *remodeling*. In Levittown, New York, a magazine called *Thousand Lanes: Ideas for the Levitt Home* was dedicated to showing all the ways that residents were making over their homes. As one reporter observed, "The sound of the hammer and the electric saw goes on incessantly in Levittown." Kitchens were being squared off. Living rooms extended. Carports enclosed. Attics finished. At the adult education program in town, "How to Finish an Attic" was the second most popular class behind "Fine Arts." "It is hard in Levittown today to find a house with an unaltered exterior—and rare to find two in a row with the same alterations," the article said.

This sense of great American gumption, of the inventiveness of veterans, the ability to pull themselves up after living in chicken coops, created an incredible sense of vindication and pride. While Levitt's creation of Levittown was long deemed heroic, it was the residents who confirmed the promise in the popular imagination. "The degree to which these predictions have been refuted is probably the most remarkable aspect of the community," effused the *New York Times*. "Far from deteriorating, the property values have increased." Without irony, the national media

proclaimed Levittown a truly diverse place. "And if there is one outstanding common trait among Levittowners," the *Times* concluded, "it appears the urge to be different."

With this uplifting story making the rounds despite the events on Deepgreen Lane, it was easy for Bill Levitt to continue to compartmentalize—or deny—the divisiveness of his whites-only towns. As a result, he gladly steamrolled ahead with his plan to construct more exclusive communities across the land. After eyeing the Belair Estate in Bowie, Maryland, Levitt outbid rivals with a \$1,750,000 offer. He would now commence building six thousand homes there, he said. As for the three-story, prerevolutionary mansion on the property, he would turn it over to local citizens to turn into a library dedicated to the legendary racehorse that once grazed on the site.

Meanwhile over in Willingboro Township, New Jersey, Levitt was busy making way for his next brand-name community. With his father out of the picture, he had no problem bulldozing the peach orchards that lined the land. He promised fifteen thousand affordable homes for veterans, as well as the world's largest shopping center and an administration building said to be "the last word" in modern construction. And it would now bear his name: Levittown, New Jersey.

Though Levitt wasn't speaking out on the events in Pennsylvania, the Myerses and Wechsers suspected he was playing his hand behind the scenes. On August 21, the day after the young officer was stoned outside their home, the doorbell rang at 43 Deepgreen Lane. Bill Myers opened the door to find a well-dressed white man in a suit. Bill's guard was up. Just days before, he had found the words NIGGER GO HOME scrawled on a wall of the building where he worked. The man in the suit introduced himself as a Levittown attorney and Bucks County district attorney. He was also the Republican nominee for district attorney in the coming election in November. "How can I help you?" Bill asked.

The attorney said he represented two buyers, whom he could not name. But they wanted to offer the Myerses \$15,000 for the home. Bill considered the man. That was a lot of money, \$2,850 more than the

Myerses had paid just weeks ago. Bill had a hunch about whom the man really represented: William Levitt.

Sorry, Bill said, the home was not for sale. "I am here to stay."

While the Levittowners struggled to reclaim their reputation, the situation in Pennsylvania was only growing more grim. With the stoning of the second cop, who was rushed to the hospital and found to have a concussion, America's model town was even further being torn apart.

After a fifteen-year-old boy, who claimed innocence, was arrested for the assault, James Newell, the mob's de facto leader, placed himself above the violence. "I am disgusted with what happened up there last night," he told reporters the day after the stoning of the officer. "It was unjustified and uncalled for. I have always advocated complete cooperation with the police." But the power was clearly going to his head. A meeting would be held, he promised, so that he could "tell my followers what I intend to do."

The police responded by setting a nine P.M. curfew in town for children under sixteen years of age who were not accompanied by their parents. Though the riot act had been read—and not enforced—before, the police now reiterated that crowds gathering on Deepgreen Lane would be arrested. But despite their warnings, they could not contain the violence. That night at 10:10 P.M., a second cross was found burning in Levittown—this time at the Penn Valley School in town. The wooden cross had been jammed into a backstop on the school baseball field.

Newell's minions expanded their campaign across the manicured lawns of Levittown, staging witch hunts on the slightest provocation. When a black man was seen leaving another house, Newell's crew confronted the owner, who they feared was selling to another African-American family; the man proved to be merely a worker.

But Newell was undeterred. He took the cause of the Betterment Committee to the local radio airwaves, where he espoused his racist views under the banner of free speech. Listeners took heed. Factions were increasingly convinced that Jews, Communists, and the NAACP were

plotting an African-American takeover of Levittown. When word of another black family moving into town spread, opponents wasted no time—spilling trash on the lawn and vandalizing the home at a cost of several hundred dollars. The rumor, once again, proved false.

While the police were making more of an effort to keep people away from Deepgreen Lane, Newell and the Levittown Betterment Committee were secretly meeting—and the stakes were rising. One night at the home of one of Newell's right-hand men, a dozen key members—husbands and wives—met to discuss the state of affairs. While Newell glommed on to power, however, it was the pit bull of the group, Eldred Williams, the unemployed man who drove the gray station wagon, who took command.

"I've been contacted by someone," Williams told the others, "someone representing the KKK who's interested in our problem." The group decided to take a vote on whether to pursue the Klan's offer to help. Who was in favor? Williams's hand shot straight up, and one by one he was joined by others in the group—a total of eight votes for the Klan. Who was against? Just five people, including John Bentley, the former township zoning officer, and Newell. Williams stared Newell down bitterly. Williams would follow up with the Klan and report back at the next meeting.

When they gathered again the following week, Williams and his supporters were ready to move forward with the Klan. But Bentley, who had joined the Betterment Committee because he thought the Levittown Civic Association was not militant enough, feared that Williams and the others were going too far in the other extreme. "I make a motion," Bentley said, "that we have nothing to do with the KKK." This time, people agreed—and all but two backed the plan to keep the Klan away. Only Williams and one of his friends dissented. So it would be done—the group would proceed without the KKK. And when they asked if Williams had anything to report from the Klan over the previous week, he said, "Nothing to report."

But Williams could not be restrained. On the heels of the police order not to gather on Deepgreen Lane, the Betterment Committee had been trying in vain to find public places to meet. Meetings were called, only to be canceled when the proprietors of the venues discovered the

purpose. On Friday, August 30, Williams defied Newell's rule and took it upon himself to act as a spokesperson for the group. He told the local papers that the Betterment Committee would convene after all: "It will be held someplace in Levittown, sometime tomorrow evening, weather permitting. The time and place will be announced later."

The next day, Williams hastily organized a meeting in the most public place of all: the baseball diamond behind the Levittown Shopping Center. More than three hundred people crowded the field as the police looked on, refusing to intervene. After the meeting, Newell ordered Williams thrown out of the group. But it was not to be. Williams had his followers too, and he would remain. During the Betterment's next private gathering, Williams was told his contact from the KKK was on the phone at his house. Newell, Bentley, and the others followed him over to Williams's house. No sooner had they stepped inside than they saw a stack of papers on a table.

"What's this?" Newell asked Williams.

"Applications for the KKK," Williams replied.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Newell told his crew, and they left.

The telephone rang at two A.M. in the home of Sam Snipes, the Quaker attorney who'd represented the Myerses in their purchase of their home. Snipes was a soft-spoken man who, like others, found himself cast into this unexpected war.

"Sam Snipes?" the voice snapped on the other end of the line.

"Yes?" Snipes said calmly.

"Are you a nigger-loving motherfucker?"

Snipes considered the question for a moment. "Yes."

As infighting gripped the mob against the Myerses and Wechslers, the supporters of the nascent civil rights struggle were facing retribution. When the Myerses needed allergy medicine, a local druggist put the house on his delivery rounds. But he could barely make it to the front door without being branded a "nigger lover." His business partner heard of the incident and insisted they stop servicing the Myerses, or lose their business. After repeated threats, the druggist suffered a nervous breakdown.

After delivering bread to the Myerses one day, the local baker returned to work the next morning to find his truck vandalized. He didn't return to their home. The milkman never came to the Myerses' home at all, despite sending them their weekly bill. When the local oil company truck was spotted at the Myerses' home, one of Newell's followers urged the others to boycott the company; thirty families followed suit. But when it was discovered that the man who'd suggested the boycott didn't comply, the others meekly rejoined.

Soon, the police themselves began drawing lines within their own ranks. One day, a reporter passed three state troopers near the Myerses' home. "Look at that house," one of the troopers said skeptically. "Myers is at work. But how about that woman and the children? What if something happens? Who is she going to ask for help? Suppose the house catches fire?"

The trooper added that some people had vowed to shoot Bill Myers on sight. They questioned why someone would remain under such conditions. The implication was clear: While some police officers respected their role in this conflict, others on the force would do only so much to protect the family.

The tensions were forming divisions between the Myerses' supporters too. Questions burned throughout the community about how—and why—the family had moved in. Leading the investigation was Ray Harwick, the young pastor who was heading the Citizens Committee on the Myerses' behalf. After taking his post, Harwick began researching the events that led up to the Myerses' move-in. This included reviewing and interviewing the actions and members of the Human Relations Council and Friends Service Association.

The more he looked, the more suspicious he became of the Myerses' primary backers: the Wechslers. Rumors were spreading within the factions that they had Communist ties. One day, Harwick showed up at Bea and Lew's home urging them to come clean "for the sake of the Myerses." Bea and Lew had received a similar visit from two Levittown rabbis who were on the Citizens Committee. The Wechslers bristled at the suggestion and refused. Politics were not the issue here, they said. "The

issue is that we have publicly befriended the Myers family and publicly supported their right to live next door to us," Lew said.

But Harwick didn't back down—much to the Myerses' dismay. Though the Myerses were not familiar with the Wechslers' political background, Daisy bristled at how Harwick and his supporters were blaming Communism for the problems in town. Harwick, Daisy felt, had been "shoved" into his position of leadership simply because he was white and Christian—qualifications that didn't necessarily make him the right person for the job. By his own admission, Harwick had no experience with the civil rights movement. "I knew Negroes were out there," he said, "somewhere out there, but I was never affected."

The Wechslers and Myerses saw right through this. Daisy, who on the advice of Pearl Buck had begun keeping a journal of her experience, wrote, "A man may have all the [seemingly right] classifications and still be a failure as a leader. A leader must be genuine, have the cause at heart; he must be fully experienced with the situation and know for what he stands. He must possess the fundamental knowledge necessary. Here was an honest man who said he did not know what civil rights meant. He had never preached a sermon on brotherhood in his years of ministry. Yet he was leading the people along these paths. How could a man with his leadership ability be so unaware of the pressing problems of his day?"

The Myerses and Wechslers bristled at Harwick's red-baiting investigations in this light. Daisy was stunned when he showed up at her doorstep to tell her that she and Bill were cleared of any suspicious background. "You are clean as whistles," Harwick told them.

"What are you talking about?" Daisy said.

"I had you and Bill investigated, and as far back as they could trace, they could find no wrong."

Daisy couldn't believe his gall. But Harwick, in the name of their civil rights, continued on his mission. On August 21, he agreed to a public discussion with Newell at a local inn, sponsored by the Levittown Kiwanis Club. Newell had put on a coat and tie, and Harwick, dressed in a coat over his pastor's apparel, smiled with him for newspaper photos. Harwick reported the findings of his inquiry into the lives of the Myerses, as if

anyone deserved to be investigated simply for choosing a home. Once again he said he had "completely investigated the financial background of [Bill] Myers and the financial background of his parents and in-laws" and had found Myers "clean as a whistle." He also said that he found "absolutely no evidence that the Myers move here was sponsored by the Friends, by the NAACP, or any other group."

Not everyone agreed. Joseph Legal, the head of the Levittown Civic Association, said there "seems to be a void in Reverend Harwick's information about the Negro family moving here." But Harwick was quick to make peace. To the shock of the Wechslers and other supporters, Harwick, speaking for the group, broke away from the very people who had devoted their lives to breaking Levittown's whites-only grip. The Citizens Committee, he declared, "has adopted a completely neutral stand on integration." The Myerses, he suggested, were pawns in the hands of the town's integrationists. "I don't like what has been done to bring the man here," he said, and characterized Bill Myers as having spoken with people who had given him "irresponsible advice."

However well-intentioned he might have been, Harwick could not escape the consequence of his actions. At home, his phone was now ringing throughout the day and night with harassing calls. It was shaking him and his family. On Saturday, August 24, at three fifteen A.M., the phone rang, and he answered it only to hear, "Nigger lover!" and veiled threats to his family. He turned to his wife. "Go home to your parents," he said, "and take the children."

The next morning, he watched his family leave. As soon as they walked out the door, the phone rang again. And it continued all through the night. Harwick began to grow increasingly scared and paranoid and began to search his house for signs of an intruder. Desperate for help, he called the operator and said, "Is there any way you can possibly trace these calls?"

"No, sir, there's none," the operator replied.

"I have got to get some means!" Harwick snapped.

With Harwick and others under mounting pressure, the Wechslers and Myerses felt increasingly under siege as well. Days and nights passed without their leaving their homes. Dinner dates were canceled. Ordinary

activities—shopping and movies—were cut back. They never knew what they would find when they opened the door.

One day when the Wechslers' bell rang, it was their neighbor and friend David Matza, a sociology professor at Temple University. Matza and his wife and young child lived directly behind the Myerses' and Wechslers' houses on 30 Darkleaf Lane. Matza was crying and distraught. He had been offered a job to teach at the University of California at Berkeley, he explained, and would be leaving Levittown in the midst of the conflagration. It pained him to think that the media might portray his move as white flight, which was anything but the case. Bea and Lew reassured him but, inside, had concerns of their own. With the Matzas gone, the crucial balance of the neighborhood was about to change.

Lew grabbed a sheet of paper and sat down at his kitchen table sketching a map of Deepgreen Lane. Bea and the Myerses gathered around him. Lew made tiny boxes representing each of the eleven houses in the area. This was a war now, and it was time to assess the sides. When he was through, they surveyed the battle map: three friendly families, four neutrals, and two hostiles. But, as Lew circled one of the friendly houses, the Matzas', the delicate balance was about to change. The house on 30 Darkleaf Lane was diagonally behind the Myerses', and directly behind the Wechslers'. If a hostile family moved into such a strategically positioned house, Lew fretted, the circumstances could grow even more grim. All they could do was wait.

The owner of the house, William Hughes, wasn't having an easy time leasing the home. A family with three small children had agreed to take over the lease beginning September 2, but then the crisis with the Myers family had made them fear for the safety of their kids, and they abruptly backed out. One night at the end of August, just as he was fearing he would never lease the home, Hughes got a call from a woman who asked if he'd be interested in leasing the home to her. "I would," he said; the price was ninety dollars per month.

"I'll be over right away," she replied. Thirty minutes later, she showed up—but she wasn't alone. Fifteen or sixteen people accompanied her as they made their way inside.

Hughes was dubious. "What's your purpose in leasing this home?"

"We, the taxpayers and property owners of the Dogwood section of Levittown, have no place to meet," she replied, "and we would like to go there and meet and talk over this situation about the Myerses' moving into Levittown."

"Who's going to be responsible for cutting the grass and looking after the property in general?" Hughes asked. "Because the people who had lived there before left it in a very poor condition. The house was very dirty, the grounds were very unkempt, the flower beds were all shook up." They all knew the rules of Levittown, after all, and how much the Levitt family wanted the lawns nice and neat. Hughes didn't want to have Levitt drive by in his big black Cadillac one day and stick him with a bill for a lawn-mowing service. "Who's going to take care of the property?" Hughes said again.

A thin, short man stepped up from behind the woman: Eldred Williams. "I live in the next block over, I'll take care of the grounds."

Hughes agreed. Then he handed Williams the keys.

## *Fourteen*

### BACK TO SCHOOL

NOW'S THE TIME to think about new clothing, shoes and school supplies of all kinds," read the cover of the Levittown newspaper, "pens, pencils, books, typewriters, luggage and leather goods, jewelry, cameras, toilet goods, sporting goods, bikes, and student-room furniture and projects." September had come, and Levittown, like the rest of America, was going back to school.

But this would be no ordinary return. As the harried and happy parents filed through the Shop-O-Rama to stock up on goods, their whispers revealed that they had more on their minds than No. 2 pencils. Levittown was about to get its first African-American teacher ever. Donald Theodore Burton, a twenty-six-year-old educator from Philadelphia, had been hired by the Bristol Township School Board to teach fifth-grade classes at the new twenty-eight-room James Buchanan Elementary School, which was opening as soon as construction was complete on September 16. A small item in the local paper noted that the school would serve several sections in Levittown including the residents of Dogwood Hollow.

This would be the school that Nick Wechsler would attend, and where, he still hoped, his parents would let him fulfill his dream of being a crossing guard. Nick had been working for the past year to become a crossing guard and had just learned that he'd got the position. Now he would get to wear the coveted uniform on the first day of school. Given the standoff over the Myerses, though, Bea and Lew, no matter how strong they had been in the past, couldn't bear the thought of little Nick standing

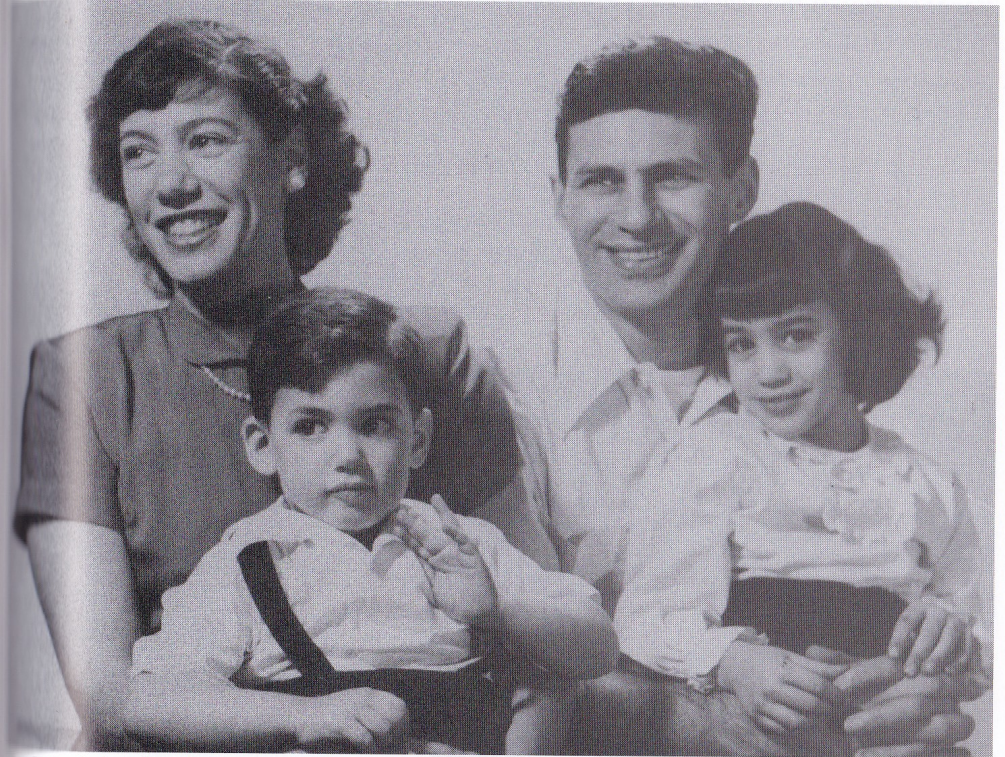


The Myers family, from left, Bill, William III, Lynda, Daisy, and Stephen.  
(Courtesy Charlotte Brooks)

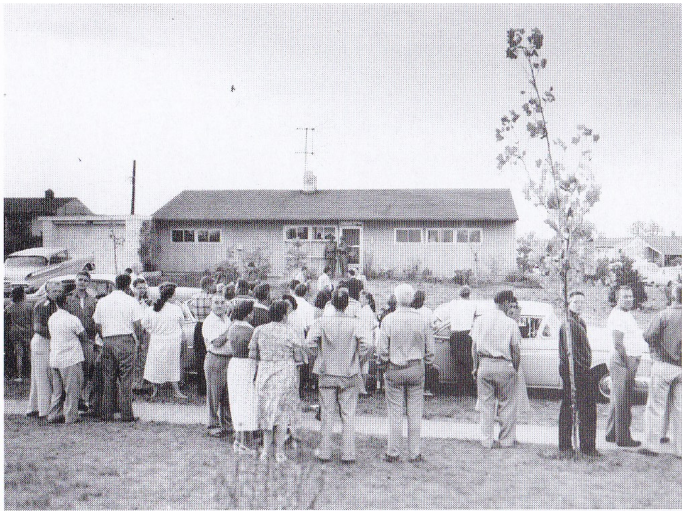


Camping out for Levittown houses.  
(Courtesy Levittown Public Library)

Taking orders for  
Levittown houses.  
(Courtesy Levittown  
Public Library)



Wechsler family from left, Bea, Nick, Lew, and Katy. (Courtesy Wechsler family)



A crowd forms outside the Myers home on Deepgreen Lane. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)



James Newell of the Levittown Betterment Committee addresses a crowd. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)

Broken windows from stones thrown at the Myers home. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)



Daisy Myers holds baby Lynda as they look at the mob outside their kitchen window. (Courtesy Charlotte Brooks)



A mob surrounds a police car near the Myers home. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)



Bill Myers, left, and Lew Wechsler work together in the Myers home. (Courtesy Charlotte Brooks)



A Levittown police sergeant injured by a rock thrown during the Myers protest. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)



Lew Wechsler with the KKK letters painted on the side of his home. (Courtesy Queens Borough Public Library, Long Island Division, New York Herald Tribune Photograph Morgue)



Myers, left, and Lew Wechsler on Deerpark Lane. (Courtesy Charlotte Brooks)



The Myers family, with baby Barry, pose for a picture outside their home on Deepgreen Lane after winning their battle in Levittown. (Courtesy Myers family)



William Levitt found hard times in the years following the Levittown riot. (Courtesy Temple University Urban Archives)

disheveled man in an orange shirt said with a devilish smile, "Even dogs don't like niggers, they can smell them too." As an Associated Press photographer aimed his camera at the scene, the man in the orange shirt protested, "Don't take our pictures with those niggers!"

Observing the fracas, Newell spoke up again, urging the crowd for "no mob violence." A few applauded, but one man barked back, "You sound like you are on the niggers' side!"

Newell stood firm, urging them not use the word *nigger*. He began to joke about the threats on his life that he had allegedly endured since taking his stand. "I was supposed to be dead tonight," he said, eliciting laughs. But with just a bit of encouragement, he slipped back into his diatribe: "Why did Mr. Myers pick out our area? Is he a fool or does he think he's better than any other colored person?" The crowd cheered as Newell became more invigorated. "We will try our best to give Mr. Myers consideration, but are we to allow our happy community to go to pot?"

More cheers, and cries of "No" met him back.

"We must settle by law this situation in which one man did not have the decency and common courtesy to respect the rights of other men," Newell said.

As his speech came to a close, reporter Rolen pursued the mob as they made their way through the night to the Myerses' neighborhood. They clapped and jeered as they cut through the streets. Some broke off toward Newell's house, which became a makeshift headquarters, teeming with acolytes. As Rolen and her colleague tried to get inside, one of Newell's followers shouted, "Don't let them come in here!" But then, from the shadows, Newell emerged to usher them inside.

Leaning back against the wall with his beefy arms crossed over his chest, Newell tried to explain himself. He had nothing against the Myers family personally, he said, and added that his mother lived next to a black family in Durham.

"So why do you object to colored residents living here?" the reporter asked.

Newell cracked a grin. "Would you like me to live in your neighborhood?"