

Homewood Then and Now

By Fred Logan

April 27, 2011

Some weeks ago, I was talking with Luther Sewell during a meeting on public school vouchers. The meeting was held on the University of Pittsburgh campus. And Luther asked me an extremely important question that had nothing to do with the meeting. He was deeply concerned. You could tell by the look in his eyes and the tone in his voice, when he asked me, “Fred, what happened to Homewood?”

Luther Sewell is the long-time publisher of Talk Magazine. He has been around for a while and he is very much in the know. Still, he was genuinely puzzled and perplexed. He reminisced about shopping when he was a boy with his father at bustling Italian-owned vegetable stands along Brushton Avenue, at a time when prominent dentists, ministers and other black professionals lived in Homewood Brushton. To a lot of black people back then moving into “Homewood!” was a sign of upward mobility.

Luther said in the late 1960s Talk Magazine could solicit over \$1,500 in advertisements on Homewood Avenue alone, back when \$1,500 in U.S. currency really was worth \$1,500. Murphy’s Five and Dime, and other commercial establishments, including the Belmar and Highland movie theaters, were lined side by side, up and down Homewood, on both sides of the street from Frankstown Avenue to Finance Street.

The first Harambee Black Arts Festival brought internationally renowned black artists and thousands and thousands of people to Homewood in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That was some of Homewood then.

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Churches, social service agencies, and taverns are the dominant institutions in today’s Homewood. Homewood’s once lively commercial corridors along Frankstown, Homewood, and Brushton Avenues are long gone. The illegal drug market now operates around the clock, seven days a week, both indoors and openly in the streets, and may well be the largest commercial enterprise in the community. Drug related violence along with street prostitution soared when the crack-cocaine trade began at the very end of the 1980s, and they have fluctuated, up and down, from year to year since then, but they have never receded to their pre-crack era levels.

Some 20 years ago, then director of the Homewood Brushton Revitalization and Development Corporation, Mulugetta Birru reported at a Jobs with Peace community forum that there were over 1,500 vacant lots or abandoned buildings in the community. Over the past two decades Homewood’s vacant lots and abandoned buildings have continued to proliferate.

The 1940 US Census counted 30,890 residents in Homewood, North, South, and West (there is no Homewood, East). Three decades later, the 1970 Census documented 20,246 Homewood residents. The 2000 US Census found only 9,283 residents in all of Homewood. This does not include old Brushton—now called East Hills—which along with Homewood constitute Pittsburgh’s 13th Ward. East Hills and Homewood have separate census tracts.

These are some of the reasons why Luther Sewell and all of us are so deeply concerned about what happened to Homewood.

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Often, we are told, and accept without question, that an entrenched “crisis” of moral values is at the root of Homewood’s social, economic, and political decline. The national black community at large, all across the USA—this includes Homewood—is awash in a crisis of family, religious, and moral values, we are told. Wide spread drug addiction, teen pregnancy, the education crisis, at risk fathers, and so on are critical problems in the US black community and this certainly includes Homewood. But taken together, in their totality, they are not the root-cause of the economic and subsequent social decline of Homewood Brushton over the past 50 plus years.

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For us to understand and answer the perplexing question what really happened to Homewood, we must not see Homewood as some peculiar social anomaly. We must, instead, place Homewood right smack in the context of the United States overall. Last summer, I heard Dr. Larry Davis, dean of Pitt's School of Social Work, say something that other black social scientists have been saying for decades. Davis said the black community today is in many very important social and economic respects what the larger US society will be tomorrow.

When we look at Homewood's decline from this vantage point and place it in the real world, we will be able to see much more clearly what happened to Homewood. We will also understand just how much more difficult it is to attack and reverse the Homewood "crisis" than we had led ourselves to believe.

We must be careful not to see the Homewood of our youth through the eyes of our youth. I smiled to myself several years ago when a young 2007 Pittsburgh city council candidate sighed how wonderful Homewood Avenue was back almost 20 years ago during the Harambee II Black Arts Festival from the mid-1980s into the early 1990s. In fact, only six occupied buildings were on both side Homewood Avenue between Bennett and Hamilton Avenues at the time.

Into the 1950s, Homewood was a predominately white working-class neighborhood. It was more economically stable than it is now, but it was never paradise. Until the 1960s, black-owned businesses were barred from the heart of the Homewood Avenue commercial corridor south of Frankstown Avenue.

In 1960, Goode's Pharmacy, Chick Hale's Restaurant, Raleigh's Billiard Hall, and Dorsey's Record Shop, one of Pittsburgh's few remaining stores from that era, were some of the dozen or so black owned-establishments along Frankstown between Brushton and Braddock Avenues, in Homewood very small black business enclave.

A recent history of post-WWII Black Pittsburgh tells us, "Homewood Brushton's black population increased from about 13 percent in 1940 to an estimated 70% in 1960." This occurred when the entire Pittsburgh region was beginning to lose the heavy manufacturing base that had created and sustained its industrial working class. Detroit and Homewood along with other rust belt cites and neighborhoods became majority black during this era.

The local steel industry is gone. The entire Pittsburgh region has been devastated. Look at Homestead, Braddock, the whole Mon-Valley, and downtown Pittsburgh, all ghosts of what they were. Pittsburgh had some 680,000 people in 1950 and perhaps 305,000 in 2010.

A few bright spots still glitter. The university and health care industries shine. Allegheny County has several affluent predominately white residential enclaves. But the old white mill towns suffer. Everyday rank and file white folks are in economic distress.

The black community at large is at the bottom of the region's decades-long decline. The black plight is magnified by systemic race and class bias, power and privilege, the foundation and cornerstone of the American status quo—and here we must add—irrespective of Barack Obama sitting in the White House.

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Since the 1950s the American economy has fluctuated through various recessions and rebounds. The overall US standard of living, however, has continued to decline in vital areas like affordable housings, transportation, education, and health care, as the cost of living continues to climb.

So, we often come across media, academic, and governmental reports moaning the "vanishing American middle class." They mean vanishing middle income white Americans. The media, academia, and the governmental skims over the status of middle income African Americans, who fall largely in the bottom half of the US middle class, and are more vulnerable to economic down turns than their middle income white counterparts. And the US president failed to mention even once the issue of the nation's poverty in his 2011 State of the Union address.

The May 2010 Brandeis University Report on the US racial income gap tells us over the past 25 years, which included the great computer revolution, told us the black white wealth gap has increased and that the black community owns relatively little wealth, that is income producing property.

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Homewood, as you well know, sits in the far eastern end of Pittsburgh. It surrounded by other predominately black, low-income communities: Lincoln Park in Penn Hills sits north; Wilkinsburg is south; the East Hills neighborhood is east; and Lincoln-Larimer is west. Homewood is not immediately adjacent to an affluent majority white neighborhood (in contrast, the Hill district touches Oakland and downtown Pittsburgh, assuming downtown can be salvaged.).

For this reason, Homewood residents should dismiss the 40-odd year rumors and whispers—which were silly to begin with—that suburban white folks are plotting, scheming, and conspiring to “take back Homewood.” You have heard this nonsense before: “Homewood is flat.” White suburbanites want to be closer to their “good jobs” in Pittsburgh.

Come on! Get real! The local establishment can’t salvage the heart of downtown Pittsburgh at “flat” Fifth and Smithfield. So, what can it possibly do with “flat”, low-income surrounded Homewood? The white professionals with “good jobs” in Oakland’s education and health care industries already live close to their jobs in Oakland, Shadyside, Squirrel Hill, Highland Park, and South Point Breeze. Pittsburgh hardly has any other “good jobs” for white people or anyone else.

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A lot of Homewood residents, and they are not alone, have argued for a long time that all the community has to do is spend its money with black-owned Homewood businesses and the community’s economy would flourish. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. This simplistic claim ignores the question and the obvious answer that if all of the people, say, in the poverty-stricken, post-steel industry Mon-Valley just spent their dollars with Mon-Valley owned businesses, would the Valley again flourish like it did in the hey days of Big Steel? Or, if all of the people in Pittsburgh just shopped in the city, would that alone, in and of itself, revitalize the city’s stagnant post-steel mill economy? In Pittsburgh’s shaky economy, almost any commercial development is like trying to build a house on quick sand.

The black community has seen countless black-owned business ventures fall by the way side over the years. Often, black people are so distressed by the plight of the black community until they become blind to the city and the region as a whole. Greater Pittsburgh is littered with the corpses of “Next Big Thing” projects that failed entirely or failed to live up to their great promise by a long shot. We only have limited space here. And life is far too short to even try to begin to list them all. But just to refresh our memory, here are a few: the \$750 M+ airport, the \$750 M+ convention center, Allegheny Center Mall, Pittsburgh Mills, Lord and Taylor’s, and on and on.

The new Bakery Square complex in East Liberty/East Side is not a sure thing. Next time you pass that way look at all of the recently renovated empty commercial space “For Rent” or “For Sale” that is very close by located both on Broad Street and on Penn Avenue near Beatty Street. Look at all of the vacant commercial space begging for tenants in downtown Pittsburgh and across the city. This begs the question, why do these presumably sane people keep developing new commercial spaces for lease when the Pittsburgh retail market is glutted with unused store space? We must place the issues facing Homewood economic development in this context.

The east end community must move beyond narrow economic development projects based on Homewood, Larimer, and other outdated, balkanized neighborhood boundary lines that are over 100 years old and have absolutely no economic usefulness for the people who now live in these areas. A joint east end development plan that includes Homewood, Lincoln Park, Wilkinsburg, etc. would have much more economic potential.

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The strong spirit Luther Sewell cited in Homewood community organizations some 40 years ago was riding the crest of the upsurge in the Black Freedom Movement. Over time, the movement waned. Many community organizations have since come and gone. Together, they never had the resources to begin to address the plight of Homewood.

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It must always be put out and up front that black people throughout this city, including Homewood, have far and away, without any question, led the generations-long struggle against the cities' illegal drug trafficking and the violence endemic to it in. This is a seminal struggle, but it will continue to flounder until the people who waged this struggle critically study the strategies, tactics, and specific goals of these many battles and heed the invaluable lessons of struggle they teach. They must do this for themselves. The police, academicians, and at large do-gooders cannot do this for them.

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The American establishment's current concern over the "crisis" in public education at predominately African American schools like Westinghouse High School in Homewood is a direct product of the now 40 year-long slide of US global power. Until the collapse of the American manufacturing industry, the primary function of the Pittsburgh public school system, for example, was to "educate" the local white blue-collar workforce. Enough white PPS students went on to post-secondary education to supply the area's local white-collar professions. Back then, the Pittsburgh school district did not care at all about post-secondary black education. In spite of this, many black students did go on to college and university education. The nationally noted educator Dr. Derrick Bell and the late attorney Byrd Brown are two examples.

Now, the United States is floundering around hoping for salvation though education to retain its position as "the world's Number One Super Power." But the whole world is now geared toward education. Just glance at India and China. All of this impacts Homewood.

It is paramount to keep in mind here that the black community's interest in public education always soars when popular black social struggle is on the rise. And in these public education struggles the community always challenges the status quo. Remember the student and community struggles at Westinghouse in the late 1960s?

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And back to our question, what happened to Homewood? Well, look around on say Hamilton Avenue or Upland Street. All across Homewood children still run, laugh, and play in spring time. People speak, wave, and call each other by name in passing. Neighbors chat. They protest illegal drugs and the public education crisis. Homes are painted. Yards are cleaned. Churches rejoice on Sunday. Homewood residents party-hard on weekends. In Homewood people still do all of the good things people do everywhere. That's Homewood then and now.