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**Ms. Burneice Avery: An Eight Mile Struggle  
Smoke and Mirrors  
By Lloyd Wynn  
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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I would like to pay tribute to a woman who had a profound impact upon Blacks securing adequate housing in post-depression era Detroit. Burneice Avery's name is probably not recognizable to those outside of Detroit or a majority of Motor City residents unless they have read historian, Thomas Sugrue's "The Origin of the Urban Crisis". You are probably more familiar with the movie "Eight Mile" which is about a rap artist struggling to overcome his demons to prove he can master the art form of another culture.

The irony of Eight Mile, at least for social critics, is that it symbolizes a battle to overcome Jim Crow in the late 1930's to provide decent housing for Blacks and not some rapper trying to break the color barrier of a genre his ethnic group did not reign supreme over (as a performer). Ms. Avery was one of those pioneers who challenged the Jim Crow policies that were being implemented by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB) in Detroit.

Burneice Avery's family moved to Detroit in 1919 like so many other Black families migrating from the South to work in the factories to assist in the war effort and subsequent production of automobiles. Blacks migrating to Detroit typically settled into what was called Paradise Valley and the Black Bottom. In 1910 there were 5,700 Blacks in Detroit but with Henry Ford's promise in 1914 of jobs with pay of \$5 per day, the population rapidly increased to approximately 41,000 by 1920 and doubled again by 1925. With the addition of other ethnic groups, the city's overall population grew to 1.5 million, comprising of 120,000 Blacks by 1930.

Hoping to escape the prejudice and mistreatment endured in the South, Blacks discovered the fatal flaw of America was just as pernicious in Detroit. Contrary to Mr. Ford's offer, Blacks were unwelcome on the assembly lines in the manufacturing plants. Labor unions viewed the influx of Blacks as a threat to their core mission of seeking better working conditions and higher wages. The rationale was Blacks would accept prevailing wages or less because coming from the South to work in manufacturing was the ideal job. Moreover, Whites did not want to work next to Blacks on the assembly lines. As a result, Blacks received only a small percentage of the 300,000-plus manufacturing jobs and worked primarily as domestics and in personal service occupations.

Detroit was challenged with an acute housing shortage after World War I like most US cities. But Detroit's crisis was particularly severe due to the expansion of the manufacturing base. Housing conditions were, in general, undesirable but for Blacks, the conditions were horrendous. 7% of Detroit's population was allocated 1% of the available housing (near eastside called Paradise Valley/Black Bottom). Typically 4 families lived in one flat, some slept on pool tables in bars, toilets were frequently added to the kitchen with only a curtain dividing the two and a majority of the housing stock was in disrepair but these families could not and would not venture into the White neighborhoods. Tenants often paid rent 5 times greater than Whites but too fearful of eviction to complain. Blacks shared their neighborhoods with Russian Jews, Italians and Greeks coming into the country. Once these groups were acclimated to the culture, they would move on to better housing conditions. Blacks on the other hand, had very few options, primarily two - move into an older White neighborhood where prices were affordable or purchase a lot near Eight Mile and hope to build there someday. Either choice involved considerable risk of loss, economic and health.

Dr. Ossian Sweet, a gynecologist, decided he wanted a better life for his young family (wife and infant daughter). He chose to move to the Westside of Detroit in September, 1925. A few months earlier, Dr. A.L. Turner moved to the Westside. An all-White mob entered into Dr. Turner's home, packed his belonging in a van and escorted him out of the neighborhood. Dr. Sweet was determined to provide a better living for his family so he took his two brothers and some friends (one was a federal narcotics officer) to stay with him the first few nights. The sellers of the property (she was White and he passed as White) had been warned that she and Dr. Sweet would be killed if the transaction was completed. Dr. Sweet and his entourage were greeted by a mob of approximately 500 residents with catcalls, racial slurs and rocks. On the second night tensions ran much higher and shots were fired. The gentleman who lived across the street was killed and another man was injured. All adults inside the Sweet's home were charged with murder, including Mrs. Sweet. The NAACP took the case and hired the famed defense attorney, Clarence Darrow as lead attorney. All defendants were eventually acquitted and Dr. Sweet moved into the home. Happiness was short-lived because the family he purchased the home for soon died. His daughter died in 1926 at the age of two and his wife died shortly thereafter. In 1944, Dr. Sweet sold the home and bought a pharmacy and moved above it. He married and divorced two more times. In 1960 after years of ill-health and depression, he was found dead of an apparent suicide. He shot himself in the head. Dr. Sweet's struggle opened the door for other Blacks to move to the Westside and ultimately became an option for Blacks wanting to leave Paradise Valley.

The other alternative to moving into a White neighborhood was to buy a plot of land in the farmland available to Blacks at Eight Mile-Wyoming. With the encouragement of the Detroit Urban League, approximately 1,000 families bought lots at Eight Mile-Wyoming using land installment sales contracts. Among the families were the Averys. Burneice Avery was raised in Eight Mile and later became a teacher in the Detroit school system. She described the dreams, hopes and challenges the inhabitants of Eight Mile faced. According to her, many started out with tents built over wood floors and they added on as they could afford it. They bought a door here a window there. "Building material was purchased on the payday plan - \$10 worth now, and \$15 worth again". She further stated, "Tar paper siding was the fashion, rooms were added as the family grew". The families remained hopeful that one day they would build homes with indoor plumbing and electricity.

During the 1940's another 150,000 Blacks moved into Detroit, severely aggravating a housing crisis that began in the mid-teens of the 20th century. During the war, 1941-45, less than 2,000 public housing and 200 private housing units were built for Blacks, yet a greater percentage of the population increase occurred these years. 43% of married Black veterans lived with family members. Of the 545,000 housing units available in Detroit, only 47,000 were available to Blacks.

In retrospect, one does not have to ask why but to the extent one understands how it happened, a clear picture emerges about the creation of ghettos and the huge disparity in the wealth of the races.

This is how it happened. The FHA and The FHLBB provided the capital and/or insurance for housing after the Great Depression. Their lending and insuring policies were based upon a model called the Lifecycle of a Neighborhood. Essentially this model was each neighborhood had an economic life of a finite number of years. The stage of the cycle the neighborhood was in determined whether the FHA or FHLBB would lend and/or invest. To identify the stage or phase of the cycle a neighborhood had reached, Residential Security Maps and surveys were used. The maps and surveys used color codes: green, blue, yellow and red to correspond to stages within the neighborhood lifecycle. Briefly, green were those undeveloped tracts of land not threaten by adverse influences (Blacks); blue were those all-White neighborhoods, well-protected from adverse influences; yellow coded neighborhoods had at least a minority family and the likelihood of others moving in was strong; and red represented those neighborhoods in decline and/or inhabited by Blacks.

The implementation of the policies required a complex underwriting system that was reinforced by restrictive covenants and one basic assumption: one Black family in a neighborhood decreased property values. Furthermore, this erroneous assumption became reality for real estate brokers, appraisers, bankers and the entire White population. With the federal government, real estate and banking industries and the community working in concert to restrict the access to resources for affordable and decent housing, Blacks were challenged by seemingly insurmountable barriers. Yet, Black women such as Burneice Avery refused to allow the dreams and hopes of so many Blacks die without a struggle.

In addition to the aforementioned forces, there were developers attempting to seize


control of Eight Mile-Wisconsin. It was like an island in a sea of White upscale housing. One developer convinced the FHA to insure his project near Eight Mile-Wisconsin once he demonstrated to them how he would keep the adverse influences (Blacks in Eight Mile) from his development. Today when you go to Joe Louis Park, there is a wall one-half mile long, six feet high and one foot wide that was used to separate the development from Blacks. The wall is symbol of the discriminatory policies the FHA employed to create the housing segregation we see today.


Ms. Avery also had to contend with the Black Bourgeoisie. They were ashamed of Blacks moving from the South and fearful that Whites would define stable and professional Blacks by the likes of the migrants. These long-time Black residents of Detroit wanted city officials to demolish the "huts" in Eight Mile and build public housing. Ms. Avery and the Eight-Mile community were steadfast in their homeownership aspirations and finally were allowed to build their homes with FHA financing - one of the few projects that were coded red on Residential Security Maps the FHA insured.

**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, Lloyd Wynn was a consultant in the secondary market. Lloyd is the author of Residential Real Estate Finance: From Application Through Settlement. [Click here](#) to contact Lloyd Wynn.

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