

LEVITTOWN'S 65TH BIRTHDAY

A LABOR OF LOVE FOR HISTORIAN DAVID MARABLE

Although I have had a wonderful life in my 81+ years, I recently had one of my very best experiences ever in order to write this story for readers. I was invited to ride along in the car with Levittown Historian, David Marable, as he shared with me some of his enormous collection of Levittown memorabilia, historical knowledge, and actual experiences with many of the people who were responsible for bringing this landmark to life.

It turned out to be an amazing 4-hour tour as I learned so much about our community's history from 1952 until today. I found it fascinating to visit current sites, hearing about the Levitt family and their historical project, viewing hundreds of photos as well as watching a 16mm film about Levittown in the 1950's. I also saw countless original newspapers, the first Levittown phone book, signs, pieces from actual homes and buildings, and so much more. There was even the original huge glass window panel from the William Levitt Post Office in the Levittown Shopping Center. (By the way, Dave had only 3 hours' notice to remove the window when the P.O. was moving to another site but he and his son managed to do it in order to add to this great collection).

There were primarily 3 Levitt's involved in this creation: father Abraham, a lawyer, who was in charge of the landscape planning, son Alfred, who was the architect (original blueprints were done in their basements, and yes, Dave has several of them) and son William, who handled all the finances. There were 17,311 original homes (six different models) which were built from 1952-1958 on 5,000 acres of

farmland where crops of spinach and asparagus once grew. They were constructed of giant sequoia redwoods sent from the Levitt's California lumber mill, much like an assembly line in 27 steps and eventually 36 homes could be built in one day. There is today only one original redwood tree still planted in Levittown and Dave was given a seedling from it, now growing tall in his own yard. (Today his gardens also hold more than 50 plants and flowers given to him by original homeowners and other residents he has met over the years).

The Levitt houses were primarily built for military veterans returning from the war as well as young families looking for their first home. They were affordable (some as low as \$8,000), well-built, many of which included major appliances such as dishwashers, clothes washers, ovens, and refrigerators, fully landscaped (Levittown was often referred to as a unique garden community!), and even included several trash cans and milk delivery boxes. What a bargain even in those times!

By the way, William Levitt was on the cover of Time Magazine on July 3, 1950 with the tagline, "For Sale: a new way of life". Dave has in his collection one of every magazine ever printed about the Levitt's. By the way, William had to give his stamp of approval before articles could be published.

Levittown was so much more than just a place to live; it was a very unique community. There were elementary schools located within safe walking distances, churches, 5 swimming pools, basketball courts and baseball fields, summer weekend contests and competitions, circus performances, marble games, kids flying wooden planes, even while the Levittown Shop-a-Rama was still being built. There were wonderful

parades with student bands, scouts, lots of kids, cars of beauty contest winners such as "Mrs. Levittown" and "Miss Levitteen" as they proceeded down Levittown Highway toward the Shopping Center.

(During my tour riding through Levittown with Dave Marable, at one point, I wondered aloud, "Who would ever have thought of all this?" and without any hesitation, he replied "The Levitt's".)

All of these activities can be seen in Dave's 16mm color film entitled "Life in Levittown" dated 1952-1956, made for William Levitt by a friend. The 20-25 minute film will be shown by him at his never-shown-before memorabilia display for Levittown's 65th birthday celebration at the Bolton Mansion at 85 Holly Drive in the Holly Hill section on Saturday, Sept. 16th from 9a.m. until 3p.m. Bolton Mansion, a National Historic Landmark, will be celebrating its own 330th birthday that day as well. You might want to come and take some photos!

How did David Marable build such an enormous collection and gain so much personal knowledge about Levittown, you may ask? Fortunately a dear friend of the Levitt family and Dave, as well, provided him with a great deal over the years. His name was Raymond Fletcher Proffitt, William Levitt's best friend. He was also their pilot and flew the whole family all over the world. At the request of William, he became their river keeper with the responsibility to keep Levittown, their crown jewel, pollution free. Before passing in 2005, Dave's friend, Ray, gave him several footlockers of memorabilia from his life travels.

Having lived in a Jubilee-style home in Cobalt Ridge section with my young family from 1959 until 1978, I, too, have loving feelings and special memories from our beloved community. One of our most memorable moments was when former President Dwight D.

Eisenhower flew in by helicopter to dedicate our elementary school on Woodbourne Road which had been named for him.

Another famous name in Dave's collection is Walt Disney, who came by train to visit the school in Lakeside which had been named after him. Dave shared with me that he has in his collection the door that Disney actually walked through at the Levittown Train Station that day.

My "tour guide" that amazing day also showed me the home in Levittown where Johnny Carson's sister used to live and was often visited by her famous brother. Also, according to Dave, Alfred Levitt, the brother who's primary responsibility was the layout of the new community, spoke frequently with famed American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Dave Marable is also interested in the history of Fairless Hills and has collectibles from that community, including its original newspapers, artwork from US Steel, maps, etc. In 1974 as Pennsylvania was preparing to celebrate its 200th Bicentennial, he was a member of the Friends for Three Arches group made up of Pennsbury teachers and residents who were trying to find a means to improve the run-down condition of the interior and replace the roof of this historical building. It was there that he met Falls Township Board Supervisor Dorothy Vislosky. She came to several of their meetings and was with the group when they had the walk-through once the historical building was restored. Dave told me that Dorothy's efforts were a major reason that the work had been completed. They remained good friends for many years.

Dave has been searching for years to find a place in the Levittown-Fairless Hills area where he can set up his entire collection of historical

memorabilia as a museum (it's currently stored in 3 locations). That would make it possible for people from all over the US and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as well as current residents and previous owners who would like to learn about the history of what a unique garden community we have. He truly believes that today's students should be given the chance to learn about it as well.

He is still looking for the right place.

Dave has a great deal of love and respect for the efforts of the Levitt family in making all this possible. I am grateful to this extraordinary historian for sharing his knowledge, experiences, and sample displays of this overwhelming Levittown memorabilia collection with me, so that I might share them with you.

Come see some of it for yourself at the Bolton Mansion on Sept. 16th between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. I think you will be glad you did!

Marilyn P. Lummis

August 15, 2017

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