

A Chronicle Exclusive

BURNED-OUT BLACKS TELL TERROR STORY



MRS. ELIZABETH VAUGHN and daughter Helen survey charred ruins of upstairs bedroom following third fire at their home in less than a month, two of

them definitely the work of arsonists trying to drive them out of their previously all-white northeastside neighborhood.

Harassed By Bigots On E'side

By **BILL BLACK**

"This just makes me hate paying taxes," Mrs. Elizabeth Vaughn said last Thursday afternoon as she stood in the fire-gutted home she and her family had managed to live in for three short months before arsonists "evicted" them.

It was a tough three months, Mrs. Vaughn explained.

"Old men made obscene gestures at my daughter Helen and me and called us Black whores," she said. "Carloads of men drove by and yelled, 'you're a long way from home, nigger'. I had to keep my younger children inside the house all summer."

(Cont. on Page 4)

Terror Story Is Told

(Cont. from Page 1)

Mrs. Vaughn, her husband George, a construction worker, and 10 of their 13 children moved into the modest house at 14625 Alma on June 2. While they were still moving their belongings into their new home, neighbors called police who responded and forced a son, Donald, to leave the house because he didn't have a key.

After that, things got worse for the Vaughns. Several false alarms summoned the Fire Dept. to their doorstep. "Person or persons unknown" shot at Helen Vaughn as she walked down the street. Their dog was poisoned. One of the Vaughn boys was beaten up.

Two young white men once approached the house with drawn knives and a police dog. Mrs. Vaughn wrenched a rifle from her husband's hands and confronted them. They left.

She received a threatening letter addressed to "Mrs. Black," which was turned over to Detroit police on June 27. Fifteenth precinct officers sent the letter to the Special Investigation unit and on or about June 29, it was forwarded to the FBI.

The letter was placed in the FBI's extortion file, where it remained for nearly three months. An FBI agent returned the letter to Mrs. Vaughn on Sept. 28, with the explanation that "the matter can best be handled by local police."

Arson investigators were unable to determine whether the fire that broke out on Sept. 1 was arson or the result of carelessness. The second fire, on Sept. 24, definitely was arson. It was set in a first floor closet while the Vaughns were away.

Unable to live in the smoke and water-damaged home, the Vaughns moved in with a married daughter. Shortly after 11 p.m. three days later, a third fire extensively damaged the upstairs of the

Vaughns' unoccupied home. It, too, was arson.

That's why Mrs. Vaughn made her comment about paying taxes.

"I know if we were white and the community was Black," she told *The Chronicle* last Thursday, "they would have caught the arsonist. But we have gotten no results from our taxes. They just take our money."

Mrs. Vaughn speaks softly, deliberately. There is a faraway look in her eyes as she talks. It's almost as if she is trying to blot out the terror and harassment of the past few months along with the sight of the charred ruins of her home.

But her eyes tell a story. She is composed. Her soft-voiced articulateness masks the deep-seated pain.

"We worked hard for the money to buy this house," she says. "We haven't begged or stolen. 'Open occupancy' may be the law, but that law is not enforced.

"I know that people with sick minds set the fires and sent that letter. They need help, but so do we. I went everywhere I could to get some help. I went to the police. They did nothing. No one did anything until I went to Frank Ditto (head of Eastside Voice of Independent Detroit).

The *Chronicle* learned that a Black newsman personally escorted Mrs. Vaughn to the Fifteenth precinct and both he and Mrs. Vaughn registered a complaint about a scout car crew that "stood by while the arsonists (second fire) took off."

"They told us they would look into it," that disgusted reporter told *The Chronicle*.

A fire repair contractor came in Thursday afternoon while Mrs. Vaughn and Frank Ditto were having a press conference. The *Chronicle*

asked Mrs. Vaughn if she planned to return to the Alma St. house.

"Definitely," she replied.

"Why?"

"Because it's mine and we have a right to live here."

Just a few minutes earlier, 19-year-old Helen Vaughn, who had been shot at as she walked down the street, had said: "I think we should have some constitutional rights — but apparently we don't."

One of the Vaughns' neighbors, one of the few that had been friendly to the new family, touched on the same issue.

"We feel we're in as much danger as the Vaughns," the distressed neighbor said.

Another resident, a very outspoken father, told *The Chronicle* that after he and his wife were given a ride home by a Black couple, "there was a lot of flak and I had to take my kids out of the school."

The school he referred to is just three blocks from the Vaughns' house. It's called "The School of the Guardian Angels."