CHRONICLE VAULT

When WWII brought blacks to the East Bay, whites fought for segregation

By Gary Kamiya

Nov. 23, 2018

Codornices Village, a World War II-era public housing project in Albany, was the focus of a racially charged battle and later became housing for married students at UC Berkeley.
Photo: UC Berkeley ASUC 1962

Just north of Berkeley off San Pablo Avenue in Albany stands a housing complex called University Village, reserved for married students at UC Berkeley. Few realize that in the years after World War II, this complex, then called Codornices Village, was the site of one of the most racially charged housing battles in Bay Area history.

At stake: whether to tear down a public housing project that had been hastily erected to give wartime shipyard workers a place to live.

World War II brought about the most dramatic migration to the Bay Area since the Gold Rush. Drawn by high-paying shipyard jobs, hundreds of thousands of people poured into the area. Richmond, home to the Kaiser shipyards, saw the most explosive growth: Its population nearly quadrupled in three years, to 93,738 in 1943. San Francisco, Oakland, Vallejo and other cities also experienced big increases.

Many of the newcomers were African Americans from the South, an influx that radically transformed the region's racial makeup. In 1940, there were 270 blacks living in Richmond; in 1945, there were 5,673. Oakland's black population soared from 8,462 to 21,770, and San Francisco's from fewer than 5,000 to 32,000.

There were also large numbers of whites from Oklahoma and the South, following the path blazed by the Dust Bowl migrants of the 1930s.

The population boom created a Bay Area-wide housing crisis. As Marilynn S. Johnson notes in "The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II," Oakland's vacancy rate fell to 0.06 percent in September 1942. Workers slept outdoors, in 24-hour movie theaters, in shifts in the same bed, in trailer parks, even in chicken coops.

For black workers, finding housing was much harder than for whites. Federal authorities, ideologically opposed to public housing, initially relied on private sector initiatives like the war guest program, which encouraged homeowners to take in war workers as tenants and boarders. Since few white homeowners would take them in or rent to them, African Americans were forced to squeeze into existing black neighborhoods like West Oakland, creating Eastern-style ghettos that had not existed on the West Coast.

When the private sector was unable to meet the need, the federal government decided it had no choice but to construct housing of its own. But under pressure from real estate interests that feared permanent housing would harm postwar construction, and clinging to the belief

that most of the migrant workers would go home after the war, the government decided to build housing designed to be temporary.

“Guided by expediency ... federal housing agencies created, in effect, distinct zones of migrant settlement along the bay flatlands between Richmond and Alameda,” Johnson writes.

In all, more than 30,000 public housing units, holding an estimated 90,000 war workers and their family members, were built in the East Bay. Among them was the 1,900-unit Codornices Village.

Trivia time

The previous trivia question: What loud nighttime noises assaulted dwellers on the eastern side of Telegraph Hill until 1993?

Answer: The coupling of trains belonging to the State Belt Line railroad.

This week’s trivia question: How many people died in San Francisco in the great earthquake and fire of 1906?

Editor’s note

Every corner in San Francisco has an astonishing story to tell. Gary Kamiya’s Portals of the Past tells those lost stories, using a specific location to illuminate San Francisco’s extraordinary history — from the days when giant mammoths wandered through what is now North Beach to the Gold Rush delirium, the dot-com madness and beyond. His column appears every other Saturday, alternating with Peter Hartlaub’s OurSF.

Dig deep into Chronicle Vault

Like what you’re reading? Subscribe to the Chronicle Vault newsletter and get classic archive stories in your in-box twice a week.

Read hundreds of historical stories, see thousands of archive photos and sort through 153 years of classic Chronicle front pages at **SFChronicle.com/vault**.

The projects, especially Codornices, ran into immediate opposition from whites. The Albany City Council warned of “an undesirable element” (i.e., blacks) that would bring integration to city schools and make Albany “like south Berkeley.” The city of Berkeley, not yet a liberal bastion, was also opposed, as was UC Berkeley, which owned 40 percent of the project’s land.

But the federal government overruled local objections and opened Codornices in 1943. Like nearly all wartime Bay Area public housing projects, it was racially segregated — white tenants ended up in the more desirable units on San Pablo Avenue, while blacks were shunted to the west side of the project, next to the Southern Pacific railroad tracks.

When the war ended, local governments had to decide what to do with their temporary housing and the people who lived there. The federal housing acts of 1949 and 1950 provided funding for 135,000 new public units nationwide to house displaced residents, and transferred title of all existing projects to local authorities. But the powerful National Association of Real Estate Boards, which had opposed public housing since the 1930s, mounted an all-out statewide campaign to block "socialistic" developments.

Red-baiting tactics led to one pro-housing city councilman in Oakland losing his seat; when he was subsequently fired from his job, he committed suicide.

Under relentless pressure, the liberal, pro-housing coalition collapsed. Between 1945 and 1965, Oakland built only 500 public housing units. In Richmond, many displaced black families, unable to move elsewhere because of racial covenants, crowded into south- and west-side neighborhoods bracketed on three sides by railroad tracks — creating the so-called Iron Triangle ghetto.

The black residents of Codornices Village eventually suffered a similar fate. Thanks to an antisegregation campaign led by future Assemblyman Byron Rumford and the progressive stance of the project's federal managers, Corornices' buildings had become largely integrated by 1946. But in a familiar pattern, white tenants who had housing options moved out, while blacks who lacked such options remained and other blacks moved in. By 1954, the project was almost 90 percent African American.

For local officials and citizens who feared they would be "overrun" by Southern blacks, integration had now gone too far, and they renewed their efforts to demolish Codornices. In 1954, with no local agency willing to take the project on, and the University of California washing its hands by saying it "would not get involved in the housing business," the federal government announced its closure. By 1956, all the residents had been forced out.

But not all the buildings were razed. Despite its earlier claim, UC did in fact get involved in the housing business — taking over several hundred units and converting them to married student housing.

The last of the wartime buildings, within whose walls a brief attempt at racial integration failed more than half a century earlier, were demolished in 2007.

Gary Kamiya is the author of the best-selling book "Cool Gray City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco," awarded the Northern California Book Award in creative nonfiction. All the material in Portals of the Past is original for The San Francisco Chronicle. To read earlier Portals of the Past, go to sfchronicle.com/portals. For more features from 150 years of The Chronicle's archives, go to sfchronicle.com/vault. Email: metro@sfchronicle.com