

Chavez Ravine: A Story of Mexican American Female Resistance in Mid-20th Century Los Angeles

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In the early 1950s, the Los Angeles public began to hear about the forcible evictions taking place in an area known as Chavez Ravine, located on the north-east hills of Los Angeles. Chavez Ravine was largely populated by a tight-knit community of Mexican Americans who had been living there since the beginning of the twentieth century. These Chavez Ravine residents built their homes themselves with the limited resources they had, and even raised animals, and cultivated their land, until the Los Angeles City Housing Authority demolished their homes for the promise of modern public housing units. By the 1960s, most of the homes had been completely destroyed and instead of the public housing that was promised, the city of Los Angeles instead sold the land to Walter O'Malley of the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team, in an attempt to modernize the city. Today the land that was once Chavez Ravine is now Dodger Stadium, and the history of the forced evictions is lost on many Los Angeles residents.

Scholarship on Chavez Ravine typically focuses on how the Red Scare influenced the Los Angeles City Housing Authority into not building the public housing, as it was viewed as a communist idea¹. Other scholarship on the Chavez Ravine focuses on the baseball stadium itself, and how little Walter O'Malley actually paid considering the value of the land. Despite the importance of both of these aspects, this paper will focus on the resistance of Chavez Ravine's Mexican American residents, specifically the Mexican American women who fought and protested these evictions. Using primary sources that include photographs, interviews, and newspapers of the time, I hope to convey these women as the resisters that they were in the face of extreme injustice.

Many historians have contributed to our understanding of Chavez Ravine, the forcible evictions that took place there, and the impact that these evictions had on the Mexican American community that once lived there. Some of these historians, like John H.M Laslett, focus their research on how the Red Scare impacted the Los Angeles City Council's decision to not go through with the public housing that was promised to the residents of Chavez Ravine. In his book, *Shameful Victory: The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine*, Laslett provides an analysis of what life was like for Chavez Ravine residents before the evictions, and as they were resisting the evictions. One of Laslett's main arguments is that of the anti-communist sentiment that was sweeping the nation and rearing its head into Los Angeles City Council politics. He describes a correlation between the growth of anti-communist sentiment and the opposition of public housing, ultimately resulting in the 1953 decision to cancel the public housing, and instead use Chavez Ravine land for "public purpose."² Although Laslett's focus on the Red Scare is important for understanding the City Council's decisions on Chavez Ravine, for my paper, I will be focusing on his research regarding the resistance of the female residents. Laslett uses extensive primary sources for his research including memoirs, local newspapers (both English and Spanish), a newsletter published by residents, transcripts of City Council hearings, and oral histories. These sources provide specific examples of female led resistance in the form of attending hearings, hiring lawyers, and holding out on selling their homes.

Another leading voice in the discussion of Chavez Ravine is that of historian Ron Lopez, whose article, *Community Resistance and Conditional Patriotism in Cold War Los Angeles: The Battle for Chavez Ravine* is of particular use to my research, because he also focuses on the

women-led resistance of the forcible evictions. Lopez writes about the Chavez Ravine female residents who wrote letters to the City Council in a bid to stop their evictions.³ Many of these women tried to appeal to the city council by explaining that they could not afford to pay the rent prices they were being quoted for the public housing project. Other women were even more resistant stating in their letters that they would not leave their homes, despite the evictions. Lopez points out that a lot of the women leading resistance would often state that they no longer felt an incentive to be loyal citizens, describing their sentiments as “conditional patriotism.”⁴ Similar to his contemporary John H.M. Laslett, Lopez focuses on the Red Scare and the end of the public housing project. Lopez’ research also uses many of the same sources mentioned earlier as well as private letters written by Chavez Ravine women, and testimonies made at city council hearings.

Another prominent scholar writing about Chavez Ravine is Don Parson. Don Parson wrote the book, *Making A Better World: Public Housing, The Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*, which is used by both John H.M Laslett and Ron Lopez in their own works. One of Parson’s main arguments is that Los Angeles was “plowed under, and a triumphant private sector-oriented corporatism took its place.”⁵ He is referring to the fact that the public housing projects, including the Elysian Park public housing, were met with fierce opposition by real estate moguls and other important people from the private sector. Parson’s research goes into great detail of Los Angeles city politics of the time, and of the progression of the potential public housing development, starting from the day when the residents first received news of the evictions in July of 1950. Similar to the previous authors mentioned, Parson also uses newspaper from the time such as the Spanish written newspaper *La Opinion* and *The Los Angeles Times*. His work mentions female protestors at a 1951 city

council meeting, who were holding up signs, and other forms of resistance such as a “sit-down strike in the office of Mayor Bowron.”⁶ Parson’s work also contains quotes from Councilmen of the time, describing how they felt about the Chavez Ravine “slums.” These quotes can help me juxtapose quotes from female Chavez Ravine residents who did not share the same sentiments about their community.

Eviction Notices and the Clearance of “Slums”

In the 1940s, the United States was facing a nationwide housing shortage. The housing shortage was made even worse after the end of World War II, when many veterans were returning from war, only to find that there were not enough homes available. Finding housing became even more difficult because of racially restrictive housing covenants that would not sell or rent to minority groups, including Mexican Americans.⁷ In 1949, to address the housing shortage, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority signed a federal contract to build ten thousand units of public housing.⁸ After much consideration they ultimately decided to build the public housing on Chavez Ravine, despite the fact that the area was already populated by over one thousand families, most of whom were Mexican American.⁹ The plans drawn up for the public housing included two thirteen story buildings, and various two story buildings that could accommodate approximately 17,000 people, compared to the 3,000 people that were already living in the area.¹⁰

On July 24, 1950, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority (CHA) sent out letters to the residents of Chavez Ravine informing them of a proposed public housing project called Elysian Park Heights. The housing project would demolish the single-family homes of the residents and replace them with modern apartment-style units that would be available for low rent.¹¹ The letter went on to explain that residents would be given a fair estimate

of the value of their land and would be the first ones notified when the Elysian Park Heights housing was completed, so they could move back in. Proponents of the Elysian Park Heights public housing, including executive director of the CHA Howard L. Holtzendorff, would justify their decision to choose the Chavez Ravine area by stating that the area was a “slum”¹³ and filled with “substandard housing.”¹² The CHA even commissioned photographers, including Leonard Nadel, to photograph the land, with a special focus on the substandard shack-like houses that better fit the narrative of Chavez Ravine being a slum. Although some of the houses were definitely considered substandard in regard to lack of plumbing and gas, more than one third of the houses were well maintained, with another percentage only needing repairs.¹⁴

Despite this, the reality is that many Chavez Ravine residents were completely satisfied with their homes and preferred to continue owning their homes rather than renting from public housing. In a 1951 article published by the Los Angeles Times, female Chavez Ravine residents Agnes Cerda, Angie Villa, and Abrana Archiega discuss their opinion on their homes being referred to as slums, stating “We did not know we lived in slums. We thought of slums as narrow, crowded, airless places with houses jammed one atop another, with people packed in like sardines in a can. Here we had room for our children to play.”¹⁵ Even architects Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra, who were hired to work on the Elysian Parks housing development were shocked to discover that some of the “dilapidated shacks” were nice one-story homes with vegetable gardens and orchards.¹⁶

Chavez Ravine resident Zeke Contreras described his neighborhood in the book, *Chavez Ravine, 1949*, stating: “Everybody had fruit trees. Fence made out of nopales. Most everybody had chickens and rabbits and a few people had pigs and cows. There were horses roaming the hills, and goats. Like being out on the open range.”¹⁷

However by December of 1950, many residents began to sell their homes to the CHA. Some residents sold immediately because they were excited about the cash offers, some sold out of fear that the offers would get lower, and others sold because they feared they would be arrested for refusing to leave.¹⁸ Still, many residents “held out” and resisted the imminent evictions. These hold outs attended city council meetings to voice their dissent against the Elysian Park Heights public housing development, amongst other forms of resisting.



Fig.1 Hillside View of Chavez Ravine. This photo shows that many of the homes were very well-maintained, despite the area being called a “slum”. Courtesy of Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.

Female Led Community Resistance

One of the biggest turnouts of community resistance happened on April 26, 1951, where over four hundred Chavez Ravine residents attended a Los Angeles City Council planning committee hearing. They were there to protest the demolition of their homes for the building of Elysian Park Heights public housing.¹⁹ The city council meeting was filled with female Mexican American residents who had a unique perspective on the evictions, as most of them were

mothers, wives, and widows of war veterans. These women voiced their opposition against the project by reminding the council that their family members went to war to fight for the same American values that were in question if their homes were to be taken away from them. Secretary of the City Center District Improvement Association (CCDIA), Agnes Cerda, spoke at the meeting pointing out that she herself did not have a problem with public housing, but that as a home owner, she preferred to own rather than to rent.²⁰ Mrs. Cerda also explained that her own son was leaving to fight in World War II, only to find out that he is “going to fight over there and have to come and fight over here for a home he hasn't got?”²¹ Mrs. Cerda’s contempt for the project and active participation in acts of resistance, including refusing to sell her home, is one example of female resistance to the Chavez Ravine evictions.

Another way that Chavez Ravine women actively resisted the evictions was by getting the media involved and writing letters. In a 1950 article published by the Los Angeles Times, homeowner Mrs. Arthur Bates writes to the newspaper explaining her situation regarding the evictions. In the letter, Mrs. Bates describes her home as “small” but “well-built” and explains her frustration about houses in the area not being fairly appraised.²² Mrs. Bates and her husband were offered only 2,900 dollars for their home despite it being worth much more than that. With her husband nearing retirement age, she wrote that they will not be able to afford to buy another home with only \$2,900. These kinds of letters to the public were a common and useful way for the female residents to actively participate in resisting the evictions. The letters were also important because they garnered public attention and support for the cause.



Fig. 2, Residents Agnes Cerda (left) and Angie Villa (right) protesting the eviction notices they received, outside a city council hearing. Courtesy of Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.

A similar act of opposition happened in May of the same year, when at least fifty women from Chavez Ravine showed up to a meeting held by Mayor Bowron to discuss the Elysian Park Heights public housing project. Even though the meeting was held for both proponents and opponents, the women were denied access. Instead of leaving, they decided to stay for several hours for a sit-down strike in the office of Mayor Bowron.²³ The women held signs that read “the Mayor is a Dictator,” to show their anger for being left out of the meeting and being evicted from their homes.

Despite the efforts of these women, in June of 1951, the city council voted to proceed with the demolition of the houses in Chavez Ravine in favor of the Elysian Park public housing.²⁴ By August of 1951, more than two thirds of Chavez Ravine residents had given up and sold their homes.²⁵ Resident Carmen Torres Roldan recalls leaving her hometown of La Loma, inside Chavez Ravine, stating “In about 1951, we left because everyone was leaving. They were giving very little bit of money. They gave my uncle about \$6,000 for the house.”²⁶ Roldan is one of many residents who feels that they were not given fair

estimates and compensation for their homes, as the 1950 eviction notices suggested. Another Chavez Ravine resident, Lou Santillan, recalls the sorrow he felt returning to his hometown after he and many of his neighbors had sold their homes and left, “It was sad going back to visit. Bulldozers working, trucks hauling stuff away, streets going to hell.” He also attests to the fierce opposition that female resident Abrana Archiega felt toward the eviction, and her contempt toward her neighbors who sold their homes. Santillan describes Mrs. Archiega shouting at him, asking him why he had returned when he had “abandoned” them.²⁷

“Hold outs” (those who refused to sell their homes) felt even more justified in their decision to stay when they would hear from their old neighbors about the difficulties of finding homes outside of the neighborhood. Life outside of Chavez Ravine was particularly hard for Mexican Americans because it was nothing like the tight knit community residents had become used to. Mexican Americans were finding it extremely hard to find neighborhoods willing to rent or sell to them, and when they would, they would still usually have to deal with hostility from their new neighbors. Other neighbors who sold, found it incredibly expensive to buy a new home considering they were not fairly compensated for their Chavez Ravine home.²⁸ The Archiega family owned multiple properties in Chavez Ravine that were valued at \$17,000 by a private appraiser, but the CHA only offered them \$11,500 for the land and dropped the offer to \$10,050 the following year after they refused to sell.²⁹

Another female resister from Chavez Ravine was a woman named Alice Martin, who opposed the forcible evictions by hiring a lawyer. Alice Martin was amongst some of the last remaining holdouts in Chavez Ravine, and continued to stay there until her forcible eviction in

1959. Mrs. Martin had been living at Chavez Ravine for more than 30 years when she received the eviction notice in July of 1950. She owned and rented several properties in Chavez Ravine, and hired a lawyer, seeking council on how to protect her rental properties. Unfortunately for Mrs. Martin, her lawyer pressured her to take the CHA's low cash offer. When she refused, her lawyer resorted to scare tactics as an effort to ward off her tenants and force her to sell. In addition to this, Mrs. Martin's lawyer even forged her signature and sold her properties for less than they were valued. Mrs. Martin's attitude was especially justified when she stated in a letter to the Torch Reporter that the whole reason residents were forced to sell in the first place, was under the premise of a public housing development that never even happened.³⁰ She is referring to the City Council's December 1951 decision to terminate the Elysian Parks public housing development project.

The End of Public Housing and The Use of Eminent Domain for "Public Purpose" During the 1950s, Los Angeles and the rest of the United States were dealing with growing anti-Communist sentiment, and this sentiment impacted the way a lot of citizens felt about public housing. Public housing was increasingly being viewed as a communist idea, and opposition against the Elysian Park Heights project kept growing, much to the dismay of Mayor Bowron and CHA public housing proponent Frank Wilkinson. Frank Wilkinson was one of the biggest advocates for Elysian Park Heights because he genuinely viewed the project as advantageous for all involved.³¹ Unfortunately for Frank Wilkinson and Mayor Bowron, during a 1952 Chavez Ravine property hearing, Felix McGinnis, a lawyer for a Chavez Ravine resident, asked Mr. Wilkinson if he belonged to any political organizations. Frank Wilkinson declined to answer the question stating that he did not want to give an answer which might incriminate

him.³² Wilkinson's response sent many public housing opponents into a frenzy, confirming their beliefs that public housing was a communist idea. In May of 1953, Norris Poulson defeated Mayor Bowron in the mayoral election and fiercely opposed the Elysian Park Heights public housing, effectively cancelling the project, despite most of the residents having already sold their homes. Mayor Poulson had the support of many public housing opponents, including The Los Angeles Times, who applauded his efforts in the battle against public housing by proudly exclaiming, "The Times is proud of its part in crying the alarm against this creeping socialism, and in supporting the Mayor who found the way to stop the creep."³³ By December of the same year, Mayor Poulson was proposing that the city purchase the Chavez Ravine land for public purpose stating that the area was "having a high incidence of juvenile delinquency." As a result of this new development, the Arechiga family appealed their eviction stating that the reason for the eviction was to make way for public housing, but as the public housing was no longer going to happen, their eviction wouldn't be necessary.³⁵

The Women of the Arechiga Family: A Final Act of Resistance

After their appeal was denied, the Arechiga family continued to fight their eviction, until May of 1959 when they were forcibly removed from their home in a very public final act of resistance. The resistance was led by the female members of the Arechiga family including Abrana Arechiga, and her two daughters Aurora Vargas, and Victoria Agustain. Aurora, a war widow, fought viciously against Los Angeles sheriff deputies who had to carry her out of her home because she defiantly refused to leave. Vargas assaulted the officers, leading to her arrest, but not before the city bulldozed her family home right in front of her. Aurora's mother, Mrs. Arechiga also resisted the forcible evictions and threw rocks at the sheriff's as they began to move her

belongings. Aurora's sister, Victoria, was also involved in resisting the eviction and immediately after the removals, was forced to pitch a tent stating that the family had nowhere else to go.³⁶ The struggle was even more intensified because it was filmed on television causing an outrage among viewers all over the nation. On the day of the evictions, more than forty supporters came out to the Arechiga property including Mexican American councilman Edward Roybal, who had done a lot to aid Chavez Ravine residents against the evictions, despite being a public housing supporter. Other important female resisters such as Alice Martin, and other holdouts were also forcibly evicted that day, however the Arechiga eviction was the most publicized. The Arechiga's even called local television outlets, anticipating that they would be forced out, presumably because they understood the public outrage that would result from the televised eviction.

Life after the Last Evictions

Following their public eviction, the Arechiga family continued to pursue legal action against the city of Los Angeles. Their attorney Phil Silver argued that the Arechiga's were condemned to leave their homes in 1953, after the Los Angeles City Council had already voted on terminating the public housing project.³⁷ Silver continued to argue that the City Housing Authority should not have used eminent domain at this point because it was no longer using the land for public purpose, rather for private use. Despite the Arechiga's last ditch effort to fight for the land, they no longer had the support of the public. Following their eviction, Mayor Poulson revealed to the public that the Arechiga's actually owned several properties outside Chavez Ravine estimated at about \$75,000.³⁸ This revelation angered many Arechiga sympathizers, as they previously thought that the Arechiga's were poor with no place left to go. With the last holdouts completely out of the way, the city

continued its negotiations with Dodger owner Walter O' Malley and effectively opened the Dodger Stadium in April of 1962, just three years after the last holdouts were forcibly evicted.



Fig. 2. Aurora Vargas of the Arechiga family being removed from her home by three Los Angeles Sheriff Deputies. Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Herald Examiner Collection. 1959.

Conclusion

The evictions of Chavez Ravine negatively impacted many Los Angeles residents and left them without homes. For some of the families who sold their homes early, finding another house meant dealing with hostility from discriminant racial housing covenants. For other families it meant going into debt, and for others, losing their homes meant living on the streets. These injustices are still heavy on the hearts of the residents who once lived there. In a 1988 letter written by former resident Natalie Ramirez to KTTV and the Dodger Organization, she angrily reminds them of the thriving community that once lived there. Ramirez writes:

“I watched your special on the 30th Anniversary of the Dodgers, and I must tell you it made me very angry! How dare anyone call Chavez Ravine a dump or a wasteland! Every time anyone talks about Chavez Ravine before the Dodgers came along, they seem to forget that many families made their homes there! Doesn't anyone want to acknowledge us because we are Mexicans? Alright, the people have all moved away and all the houses are gone. But please don't keep referring to it as a dump or a wasteland!”³⁹

This impassioned letter written thirty years after the evictions shows that the hurt suffered by the displaced families continued even after the last evictions in 1959.

The forcible evictions that happened in Chavez Ravine during the 1950s were extremely unfair to the populations that had been living there for decades. Over three thousand Chavez Ravine residents were displaced during these evictions, most of whom were Mexican American families who had built their homes there from the ground up. After receiving notice of the evictions, residents took action and began organizing protests opposing the public housing that was set to be built on their land. Female Mexican American residents took fierce action in resisting the evictions, in a time when female political participation was not common. Women such as Agnes Cerda, Angie Villa, Abrana Arechiga, Alice Martin, Aurora Vargas and her sister Victoria Augustain are highlighted in this paper to showcase the resilience of these residents, and to prove that these women were passionate about fighting the evictions. It is important to shed light on this topic because a lot of the current scholarship on Chavez Ravine focuses either on the Red Scare aspect and the growing opposition to public housing, or what became of the land after the eviction, which is the Dodger Stadium. While both of these focuses are important, they both overlook the greater issue, which is the unfair displacement of over one

thousand families, an entire community. This paper contributes to the scholarship of Chavez Ravine by showcasing the struggles the women faced when fighting for the right to keep their homes and the resistance with which they fought these battles.

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