Red Scare Politics and the Post-War Racialized vision of Chavez Revine

By Mike H.F. Wood

By the late nineteenth century, Anglo city leaders in Los Angeles advertised the City of Angels as an exotic destination within the United States for tourists, utilizing fragmented elements of California's history to their advantage by romanticizing the Spanish past, while ignoring its Mexican present[1]. After the end of World War II, the surging economic gains made by California began to raise questions of how money should be spent and what the new and improved version of Los Angeles should entail. Not only had California been at the epicenter of the booming defense and aerospace industries, but it also was entitled to federal government money handouts through the National Housing Act of 1949. With established liberal and conservative Anglo powers differing over what their vision of a revitalized city was, lower class and minority neighborhoods became the battling grounds of progressive reform and elite and upper class agendas.

In post- war Los Angeles, were two opposing Anglo agendas, both of which had one resulting commonality: the uprooting of a long established minority/low income community because it represented to them an expendable and replaceable eyesore. Several historians argue that the postwar political climate in Los Angeles led to the eventual demolition of the communities in Chavez Ravine. Don Parson, John Laslett, and Andy McCue share similar perspectives on the importance of the impact that Red-Scare politics had upon this conflict. In contrast, Ronald Lopez and Mary Pardo maintain that the resistance to the proposed public housing projects may have been the deciding factor in why they were never actually constructed and the project was ultimately abandoned. The truth may be an indistinct haze that lies somewhere in the middle of these assessments in the current literature on Chavez Ravine. The realities of the battle for this rustic patch of land set above downtown Los Angeles certainly runs much deeper than the popularized remembrance of a professional baseball team coming to town and needing a location to build their stadium.

In the early 1950's, the mostly Mexican American communities of Chavez Ravine fought the Anglo vision for a housing project as best as they could. Red Scare politics were implemented by a coalition led by the *Los Angeles Times* and other special interest groups in order to disrupt the proposed

projects, forcing the City Housing Authority to sell the acquired property to the city of Los Angeles. This left former residents, who had already sold their homes and who had been promised first choice of the proposed improved housing, to search for new homes in an unwelcoming and often racist real estate market. It also forced any remaining residents out of the Chavez Ravine area by eminent domain with nothing but the memories of their once cherished and tightknit community to hold onto.

Liberal Agenda Sights Its Target

By July of 1950, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority and the Department of Health had branded the neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine including Bishop, La Loma, and Palo Verde, as an example of one of the worst slums in the Los Angeles area at the time[2]. A 1949 survey compiled together a cluster of statistics that ranged in everything from potential land values, to lacking plumbing and toilets, to incidences of tuberculosis[3]. Chavez Ravine residents, however, had a different perspective, being that many had lived there for generations. One homeowner angrily stated "[H]ow dare they call it a slum! My family has been here for thirty years, and I would choose nothing else"[4]. The variations of housing in the neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine were vast. There were very well built structures with running water and indoor plumbing, made out of standard building materials. There were some in poor condition that needed repairs or general work to be done. Lastly there were some dwellings that could have been considered to be nearly uninhabitable shacks, barely held together and standing. It was the latter that caught the outside and unwanted attention of the CHA and ultimately led to the area being targeted for urbanization[5].

One argument is that the standards of living and lacking of everyday modern conveniences in Chavez Ravine were attributed to the general neglect of the area by the City of Los Angeles. This was no fault of the residents themselves and did not come about from a lack of trying to improve their community. After World War II, citizens in Chavez Ravine petitioned the city council to provide them with the elements that constituted a prototypical suburban neighborhood such as streetlights, access to public transportation, paved roads and infrastructure, and better working and updated sewer systems[6]. It was for this reason that it was selected to be the site of one of four public housing projects, including the Rose Hills Extension site and two other yet to be determined vacant areas[7]. These projects were all to be funded by the recently passed federal legislation known as the National Housing Act of 1949, and the CHA was eager to put newly acquired funds to use[8]. Chavez Ravine

had never received the public assistance that was needed or requested by its residents. Instead, it was now slated for demolition.

In a letter to all residents of the neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine, which was Bishop, La Loma, and Palo Verde, Sydney Green of the City Housing Authority officially documents the disturbing news, informing them of the impending plans for the housing projects. Dated July 24th, 1950, the letter's intent was to notify a lower-income minority community that it was to be demolished and replaced by a clean and modernized settlement that would be more aesthetically pleasing to the post-war Anglo establishment. The language of the letter suggested an air of friendly, almost neighborly relationship as it told how CHA agents would be assessing homes and properties in order to offer a "fair price" to residents.

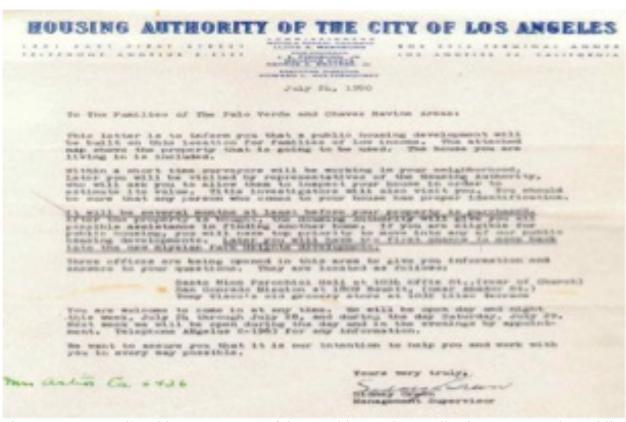


Figure 1 Letter to all residents. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

The offering prices made by the CHA to homeowners were indeed very low, to the point where most families being told that they had to relocate could not find any affordable housing anywhere else. Albert Elias' father, for example, sold his house outright for \$9,600, only to have to turn around and buy one in Lincoln heights for \$15,000, putting the man already in his sixties into debt

once again[9]. This fact coupled with the circumstances of segregated housing markets put even more stringent restrictions upon minorities looking to purchase homes[10]. In reality the letter was essentially a pending eviction notice, highlighting its remarkably Anglo goal, being that the names of the area were changing from places like La Loma and Palo Verde to Elysian Park Heights. Keeping in line with its tone of what can only be understood as simulated friendly concern for the residents of Chavez Ravine, the letter stated the phone number and office hours of the CHA for any assistance or questions that evictees may have had, underestimating the responses and reactions of those living there[11].

The people who called the neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine their home didn't understand how, after striving to better their community, such a devastating decision regarding their fate could have been reached. They were understandably angry and many were skeptical of the promises being made to them by the City Housing Authority, and ended up being rightfully so. In a newspaper article from the October 10, 1950 edition of the Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles area lawyer Marshall Stimson attacks the proposed project. Stimson had subdivided land there in the early 20th century and knew how dear this place had become to its residents, many of which had lived there for multiple generations by the 1940's and 50's. Stimson also stated his concern over the fairness of prices offered to residents and didn't believe that they would receive adequate compensation that would allow for purchases of new homes elsewhere, going on to suggest that these acquired federal funds be distributed for work and repairs as opposed to building of new housing[12]. Chavez Ravine boasted the highest proportion of homeowners in any Los Angeles Mexican American community. Facing dislocation, even if supposedly temporarily, would turn homeowners into renters, who would be searching for homes while dealing with residential and racial segregation and a shortage of affordable housing markets[13].

Echoing similarities from the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century, public housing advocates saw the barrios as unclean breeding grounds for disease, along with social and moral depravity. The irony here is that adding thousands of people and units to an area that was once wide open and much less populated arguably only adds ingredients for disease, drug use, and juvenile delinquency[14]. Architects Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander were chosen to manage the massive project proposed by the City Housing Authority, but despite what was a savory contract for each of them, both had their doubts about the undertaking from the beginning. Apprehension is an understatement for what the renowned architects felt when they learned of the CHA's intention of adding approximately 13,000

more residents to Chavez Ravine, bringing its total population to 17,000 if including the current resident population.

Upon physically visiting Chavez Ravine itself, Alexander and Neutra felt even less cohesion with the project when they observed the orchards and vegetable gardens in wide open spaces and single family dwellings that were not as bad as had been conveyed by the CHA's assessment of the area[15]. It was apparent to the would be creative minds of the proposed project that the community of the Chavez Ravine area, though dubbed to be dilapidated and rural by the building codes and standards at that time, was still a healthier environment for families to live and grow up than a cramped and crowded apartment building, lacking open spaces, home-grown and natural vegetation, and clean fresh air.



Figure 2 Artist's rendition of Elysian Park Heights. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

Former residents of Chavez Ravine themselves admit that at times the community had some deficiencies and had its own elements of imperfection. This realization however did not take away anything from their quality of life or degrade their cherished experiences and memories of the once tightknit community. Henry Cruz conceded that Chavez Ravine "... wasn't Brentwood or Beverly Hills, but we were happy people here in this neighborhood. A lot of fond memories here"[16]. No amount of money and prosperity can create a perfect neighborhood if the ingredients for sociable relationships and genuine care and concern for fellow community members are absent from daily life

and interaction. Carmen Torres Roldan recalls the warm feelings of such interwoven communal interactions:

"We were all like brothers and sisters, and the mothers were all *comadres* you know, they baptized each other's children. And what was really, really special was that on Saturday, five o'clock in the morning when the sun was just coming out, the boys used to play the guitar and serenade everybody, and it was so beautiful to hear the music in Spanish."[17]

Roldan's point of view reflects the vast majority of the recollections of former residents of Chavez Ravine. Although they were not living in the lap of luxury, (far from it according to the common upper-middle class suburban standards at the time) the families that made up these communities were grateful for the simple lives that they lived and proud of what they worked so hard to earn and own. Most were not willing to abandon their homes and ideals without a fight. Enter Frank Wilkinson.

Wilkinson was the point man for the City Housing Authority, and thus was sent around the neighborhoods of La Loma, Bishop, and Palo Verde, along with Ignacio "Nacho" Lopez, and attempted to try and convince residents to willingly sell their homes and properties to the CHA[18]. Going door to door, agents of the CHA made guarantees of first priority for the new housing upon completion, along with promises of no future racial discrimination, and rent scales that would match up with income levels. Some residents however, claimed to have felt coerced or intimidated into selling what they owned for fear of being forcefully evicted from their homes if they did not comply. Because of the combination of either promises for future rental housing or through strong-arm tactics by City Housing Authority agents, many residents of Chavez Ravine ended up selling their homes. Homeowners from all over South-Central Los Angeles that were going to be facing down eminent domain because of the selected sites for public housing projects voiced their concerns at a meeting in September of 1950. Wilkinson himself was there trying to ease any trepidations that they had, but for those who showed up to this meeting, there was nothing anyone could have said for their minds to be changed on the matter[19].

Wilkinson, due to his youthful naivety and optimistic aspirations for improving housing conditions in Los Angeles, truly believed that the work he was doing for the City Housing Authority was beneficial and that the Liberal Anglo agenda of public housing would have a profoundly positive impact upon the minority communities that they were to be implemented in. Later, Frank Wilkinson would remark that his involvement in the Battle of Chavez Ravine

was the biggest regret of his entire life[20]. Coming from a well to do family in Beverly Hills, Wilkinson distanced himself from that realm by travelling the world just prior to World War II and seeing firsthand the effects that poverty could have on a population. Coming back to the life he had been used to was a complete culture shock and catalyzed his involvement in the liberal ideas of reform of public housing and welfare, and political ideologies that would later become the reasons for his fall from city government and service[21].

The McCarthy Era and Red Scare Politics

There were a plethora of opponents to the proposed housing projects in Los Angeles that were not in danger of losing their homes or properties as a result of eminent domain, or were worried about their own neighborhoods losing value because of nearby temporary housing locations while the projects were to be built. This tumultuous time in American history is forever marred by the effects of the newly hatched Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and other communist governments around the world. The waves of destruction caused by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anticommunist sentiments spreading throughout the country consequently made liberal agendas become questionable in terms of political affiliations. Public housing in general had attained a damning label of being "creeping socialism"[22], and such a branding at that point in time was a very short distance away from the communism that had started the social and political fires that were gaining fuel and momentum.

Fletcher Bowron, the Mayor of the City of Los Angeles from 1938 to 1953, originally was in support of the City Housing Authority's proposed housing projects, including the Elysian Park Heights project that was to be constructed in Chavez Ravine. Most members of the City Council were also in favor of the projects continuing on as planned. But the stigma that the so-called creeping socialism that was public housing carried, and its association with communism during the Cold War, had an overwhelming reversal effect and tendency to persuade and change elected officials minds. One by one, Council Members switched their stances from pro-housing to anti-housing, until the anti-housing minority became the majority on the matter. Councilman Harold Darby was the one to make this role reversal take effect when he abdicated his former position on the housing projects, stating that after doing much pondering over the issue, public housing was "... the creeping cancer of socialism [which] will bring us to stateism... and social decay"[23].

Mayor Bowron's support for public housing wasn't so closely related to leftist liberal agendas as one might think. Originally he had been in support of it,

along with most of the rest of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Bowron shifted more to the right wing politically after World War II however, and mainly approved of public housing options due to the increasingly dire housing shortage across the Los Angeles area, rather than being a warrior for social justice[24]. Even the Mayor was not out of the grasping talons of the Red Scare political machine that was tearing through the city, state, and country in the early 1950's.

Bowron had been subpoenaed as a witness in a hearing where the City Housing Authority was seeking more funds for the Elysian Park Heights (Chavez Ravine) housing project. Upon Mayor Bowron leaving the courtroom, a citizen waiting outside named John Hogya, a proclaimed small property owner and opponent to the public housing projects, accused him of working for Joe Stalin. This comment was too much for the Mayor to handle, as his natural reaction was to throw a punch at the man right there in front of the courtroom he had just left and in the presence of newspaper reporters and photographers[25]. This altercation is a principal example of the connotation that being associated with socialism and communism carried in the public opinion of the McCarthy era in Los Angeles, and offers insight into the mindset of elected officials, even if they had initially been in support of the seemingly Liberal agenda.

Protests and "Conditional Patriotism"

Though there were many residents of the neighborhoods in Chavez Ravine that sold their properties early on as a result of either guarantees made by the City Housing Authority or coercion and intimidation by agents of the CHA, there was still a remaining stronghold of those who would not give in so easily. This rigidity was evident from the beginning of deliberations over the housing project when Frank Wilkinson first approached residents about selling out. He was surprised at the number of homeowners he encountered that were politically shrewd and aware. Several had been a part of earlier protests against the fledgling freeway systems that had threatened the predominately Mexican American areas, and were still rightfully wary of the Anglo establishment and bureaucratic mechanisms[26]. To many Mexican Americans of La Loma, Bishop, and Palo Verde, there was no price to sell at that would compare to the feelings of community pride and relationships that had been sweated and labored for, and built up for multiple generations in many cases. Albert Elias remembers the day his father found out that he could buy his home in Chavez Ravine, and how he was so excited that he forgot to find out how much it would cost:

"Alright, you got it for \$475.' The secretary had the paperwork done and my dad signed it and she gave him a copy, and we went home. He was real proud. 'I am buying a house,' he said."[27]

Elias was later one of the individuals to fall victim to the "fair pricing" offers made by the City Housing Authority.

The protests groups from Chavez Ravine that rallied against the housing projects indeed had male figureheads in the leadership positions. However, it was the women of the community that made up the majority of the most outspoken and active amongst the protestors[28]. These women activists particularly brought about their oppositions in terms of their participations as mothers and wives of veterans and active duty military personnel and the patriotism that comes along with that sacrifice. This was groundbreaking for the Mexican American status quo, wherein women's roles in politics generally were uncommon in this time period. But when women did become involved in political activism, it usually spawned from issues that dealt with interests over familial life and community webs[29].

One protest that was staged by women activists was in the form of a sit-in. They took over the reception area just outside of Mayor Bowron's office door and refused to leave. Because they were barred from a conference held by the Mayor in May of 1952, a group of protestors marched around city hall carrying their picket signs that varied from negative comments about the Mayor to equating the public housing projects to "commies, progressives, and socialists" [30]. The conference was held in order to discuss Proposition B, which would put the controversial public housing to a civic vote, and was to be on the upcoming June ballot.

Figures 3 & 4 Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

The women activists of Chavez Ravine seemed to have a sort of moral authority on the issue that the men from either side of the argument did not have. They attended in force the public hearings held by the City Housing Authority, the City Council, and the Planning Commission. They spoke at these hearings against the proposed public housing projects and in favor of keeping the homes and properties that were lawfully theirs. Mabel Hom's statements brought up the point that discriminatory practices had forced minorities to live in places such as Chavez Ravine when it wasn't desirable to be used in development. But once capitalist interests realized what the communities there actually had available as far as resources go, they then

wanted to take it away from them. Hom went on to say that if the proposed projects continued as planned, and if radicalized socialism and communism were really the concern, then there would be approximately 1,100 displaced families that may not feel so American after experiencing such a thing[31]. Hom's powerful assertions played into the growing fears caused by the Red Scare politics already at the forefront of the battle for Chavez Ravine, but her testimony was later negated because she lived just outside the boundaries of the redevelopment area.

Agnes Cerda also gave her perspective on the situation at the public hearings. Cerda's arguments showed that she and the other members of the community fit into the mold of American pioneering and patriotism. They had built their lives and homes there in the most American way possible, with hard work and determination. As the mother of two boys, one of which was a combat veteran, she attempted to plea to the public feeling towards veterans and their families. Cerda also brought up the potential risks and dangers that were liable to occur when forcing taxpaying citizens to give up their land and homes. This in fact would take away a community's incentive to act as what was considered to be "good American citizens" and make them question the country that they had served, making their patriotism conditional[32]. It is unclear as to whether these possibilities were to be viewed as threats or warnings. But they did raise a concern over the fact that displaced residents could become radicalized as a consequence of the proposed housing projects being constructed, giving the anti-housing advocates ammunition for their cause.

Conservative Agenda Sees Its Opportunity

The August 20, 1951 issue of *The Los Angeles Times* contained an article titled "Settlement Losing Battle for its Life". It described the plight of the residents of Chavez Ravine up to that point and painted a vivid portrait of what life there must have been like for Angelinos that had never seen the valley or been there[33]. When contemporary thinkers read this article, they must be cautious of its intent and bias. *The Los Angeles Times* of the post-war era was notoriously conservative and had its own reasons for putting forth publicly the perspective of the minority population that lived in Chavez Ravine. A spokesman from the City Housing Authority is quoted saying that the negotiations for the property have been "...very smooth and satisfactory' despite protests and 'bad publicity" [34].

After a year's time of back and forth between liberal pro-housing and conservative anti-housing supporters, the public housing advocates and their agenda was dealt a devastating blow that it would never be able to recover

from. On August 29th, 1952, while testifying in what he thought was just a standard hearing regarding eminent domain in Chavez Ravine, Frank Wilkinson was questioned regarding his personal and political ideologies and practices[35]. After refusing to answer questions that he believed violated his first amendment rights, Wilkinson was suspended from his job the next day. This single event and Wilkinson's alleged ties to members of the Communist Party would be the beginning of the end for the proposed public housing projects in Los Angeles. Indeed Wilkinson was secretly a member of the Communist Party, which is why he had refused to spell out his political affiliations[36]. Several months after the initial eminent domain hearing that sparked the controversy, the California equivalent of the House Un-American Activities Committee came to Los Angeles to investigate the City Housing Authority. Wilkinson, along with four other members of the CHA, took their fifth amendment rights and refused to answer questions that might have incriminated themselves, which during the Red Scare was as good as an admission of guilt. All five were fired from their jobs as scandal and association with the Communist Party tarnished the CHA's public image. Wilkinson's wife was even let go from her teaching position with Los Angeles Unified School District[37].

The Los Angeles City Council had changed its position on public housing long before the investigation into the City Housing Authority ever began. Mainly this was due to the Red Scare, although there were some local reasons for this as well[38]. The Conservative Anglo establishment, under the banner of creeping socialism, exploited its resources and influence throughout the city to undermine the Liberal Anglo agenda. The politics of the Red Scare were the biggest tools at their disposal other than their wealth and power based authority. *The Los Angeles Times* led a right wing coalition including the Chamber of Commerce, the Home Builders Association, the real estate industry, private construction and contractors, and the Small Property Owners League to name a few, against the remnants of the public housing contingency[39].

The 1953 Mayoral election proved to be the perfect opportunity to change the circumstances of Downtown Los Angeles politics. The *Times* publisher himself, Norman Chandler, reached out to then Congressman Norris Poulson and requested that he run for Mayor against Bowron if Chandler could guarantee the financial backing of businessmen in downtown. Poulson admittedly didn't know much in regard to the problems that faced Los Angeles, but he was openly against public housing and its socialist characteristics, which made him the prime candidate to be supported by the Conservative Anglo constituency[40]. Red Scare politics and manipulation of

the strong anti-Communism sentiments of the general public ended up being the deciding factors in the election, as the Poulson campaign strategy was to undermine Bowron by aligning he and his supporters with socialism and the public housing controversy. The *Times* and its allies got their victory when Poulson defeated Bowron in the Mayoral election[41]

Privatization and the Vision of Downtown Urbanization

The labor unions in Los Angeles had been amongst the supporters of the proposed housing projects because for the members of said unions, having work means steady pay[42]. To the neutral historian reviewing the reasons for why events transpired the way they did, the motives behind the two opposing sides of the public housing controversy must be analyzed. Ultimately it came down to what made more money for more people. The Conservative and antipublic housing agenda was rampantly supported by those that stood to gain from the privatization of the housing industry. Rumors of council members being paid off by the real estate lobbyists came out but without any pursued consequences[43].

Once the housing project had ultimately failed and crumbled apart, the City Housing Authority sold the acquired lands to the City of Los Angeles, where it remained until its eventual sale to Walter O'Malley and the Dodgers Organization several years later. This was a better fit in regard to the new vision for Downtown Los Angeles of Mayor Poulson and the Conservative establishment. The beginning of a comprehensive corporate modernism became the goal for Poulson's office. On the topic of Downtown Los Angeles being decentralized, Poulson stated, "...no city can be a great city without a strong downtown core"[44]. Public officials, labor groups, and corporate interests all banded together to revitalize the downtown area and what they considered to be the decline of the inner-city. This racialized corporate modernist vision for Los Angeles in the 1950's once again affected minorities, elderly, and those of lower income negatively by continually displacing and even destroying whole communities in the name of perceived improvement[45].

The Story Untold

Most publicity associated with the Battle of Chavez Ravine is connected to the coming of the Dodgers to Los Angeles and the bulldozing of a community in order to build a brand new baseball stadium. Images of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputies physically dragging the last members of the community from their homes are by far the most widely known and

recognized accounts of the incident to the majority of people. But prior to the official death of the community there were years of protestation and political conflict that led up to it.

The purpose of this paper was to shed some light upon this less-known story of the Battle for Chavez Ravine and to take a glimpse into the larger post-war era racialized urbanization agenda. The tendency to focus upon the Dodgers Organization's role in the displacement of the predominantly Mexican American population fails to properly give historical agency to the events surrounding the public housing controversy. Primary sources on the topic are sparse and mainly consist of newspaper articles from a media outlet that had its own biased interests and intentions behind the stories that it publicized. For this reason, the compilation of photographs and first-hand accounts by Don Normark is a treasure for anyone interested in the history of the neighborhoods of La Loma, Bishop, and Palo Verde. Community displacement was an ongoing trend that could not have manifested simply overnight. Powerful bureaucratic forces and wealthy special interest groups inevitably enacted their modernized urban visions for the future of Los Angeles, at the expense of working class minorities and without regard for what the consequences would entail.

Footnotes

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- [34] Ibid.
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