

Housing Shortage

Finding housing was a major problem for the thousands of African Americans, who flocked to the Southland seeking war industry jobs.

Many had to double up with relatives or friends because, as the Los Angeles Urban League noted at the time, an estimated 85 percent of Los Angeles had restrictive housing covenants that barred African Americans from living in white neighborhoods.

For those who had no contacts in the established African American neighborhoods, Bronzeville/Little Tokyo became a port of entry. This downtown district that once housed about 30,000 Japanese Americans ballooned to an estimated 80,000, according to a Los Angeles County Health Department count. Everything from vacant stores, garages, churches and temples became makeshift living quarters. Slum conditions developed as sometimes 16 people lived in one room or 40 people shared one bathroom. The term "hot beds" came into use to describe the overcrowded situation where a bed was immediately taken over by someone else as soon as a person got up.

Although the large majority of Bronzeville/Little Tokyo residents were African Americans, Latino Americans also occupied the area.

To make matters worse, war industry manufacturers sometimes moved out into the suburbs to avoid hiring African Americans. This forced African Americans to commute even farther, putting a strain on the public transportation system. However, the Los Angeles Railway (LARY), the public transportation company at the time, refused to hire qualified African Americans and cited a man-power shortage for failing to increase railway vehicle service.

1942

As the housing and public transportation situation worsened, a mass meeting was held at the First AME church on Dec. 13, 1942. More than 1,500 people, both African Americans and whites, attended the meeting, which was spearheaded by the Negro Victory Committee, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Negro Congress, the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel.

At the meeting, attendees heard about an African American war worker, who had been evicted from a rat-infested home by the City Health Department but was refused housing at a vacant housing project because the racial quota for that housing project had been met. Meeting attendees blasted the racial quota system, a policy where the percentage of minorities allowed into a housing project was not to exceed the minority population in the surrounding neighborhood. The evicted war worker had six children and a disabled husband.

1943

Soon after the meeting, Nicola Giulii, chairman of the city Housing Authority, announced that they would liberalize the housing quota for African Americans in the housing projects. However, in April, the Negro Victory Committee learned that three African Americans were turned down for housing in the Aliso Village projects, although there were vacancies. The committee was told that the African American quota had been met.

Throughout 1943, African American newspapers published a number of editorials, columns, ads and letters to the editors, denouncing housing shortages for African Americans and restrictive housing covenants. The NAACP focused their March 1943 conference in San Francisco on African American housing since this was a problem not only in Los Angeles but the entire state.

A June 3, 1943 California Eagle column read in part: "In the rancid, rat-infested area once known as 'Little Tokyo,' the great migration of Negroes from all over the nation is finding a home, one reeking with filth and dilapidation." The column likened the racial housing covenants to that of Jews in Germany.

That same month in June, the Los Angeles Council of Social Agencies, under the Department of the Community Welfare Federation, formed a special Little Tokyo Committee to deal with the thousands of African American war workers in the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area.

Little Tokyo Committee Chair Katherine Kaplan, in a Nov. 4, 1943 letter to California Gov. Earl Warren, wrote of the unprecedented migration of African Americans into Los Angeles and requested aid in housing them. She estimated that a minimum of 175 African Americans were coming to Los Angeles per day.

The letter read in part: "The former Japanese section in Los Angeles, known as 'Little Tokyo,' has become a colored ghetto, in which all available rooms have been occupied. Even storehouses and store fronts are being used for dwellings. It can clearly (be) seen that such conditions, including unsatisfactory sanitary conditions and general tenseness, constitute conditions that are ripe for epidemics, vice, and race riots."

In July, the Negro Victory Committee again demanded a lifting of the quota system from public housing projects and telegraphed the Los Angeles City Housing Authority, the mayor and board of supervisors.

By the summer of 1943, Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron was calling for the federal government to build more housing for African Americans. Bowron felt the housing shortage was a federal, rather than a local problem, since it was created due to war worker demand.

On July 7, 1943, Bowron held a special Leadership Roundtable meeting to specifically discuss the housing problems in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo. Several other meetings followed in August.

A July 12, 1943 memo from Arthur Miley to Los Angeles County Supervisor John Anson Ford observed that the Los Angeles County Housing Authority had three housing projects and all of them were "white projects" with no African American occupancy. The Maravilla Projects in East Los Angeles, however, included Latinos, as well as white residents.

In November 1943, Bowron's office angered the African American community when Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Orville Caldwell testified before the House Naval Affairs sub-committee that halting African American migration into Los Angeles was a solution to the housing problem. Caldwell offered no recommendations for the labor shortage if African American migration should be halted. The sub-committee was holding hearings in Los Angeles to investigate the impact of wartime military contracts.

WILLOWBROOK CONTROVERSY

As the housing situation in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo burst at the seams, federal housing authority officials began searching for suitable sites to build housing projects.

In late 1943, federal officials proposed to build temporary war housing in the unincorporated city of Willowbrook, a then-white neighborhood next to Watts and Compton.

The white Willowbrook residents erupted in protest, with many claiming that their property value would go down. There were threats of race riots and revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Everyone from Sheriff E.W. Biscailuz, Chief of Criminal Division Clem Peoples to Gov. Warren monitored the situation.

Federal Public Housing Authority Regional Director Langdon W. Post took the brunt of criticism from the white residents. At a contentious Feb. 5, 1944 meeting, Post tried to explain the overcrowding in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo and defended the need to build African American war housing in Willowbrook. Several white residents wrote to Gov. Warren, denouncing Post and demanding that he be removed from office for being un-American.

1944

During a five month period in 1944, the city embarked on a campaign to improve Bronzeville/Little Tokyo's health, fire, housing and crime problems by serving abatement notices throughout the area. An estimated 57 buildings were condemned as unfit for human habitation, and another 125 buildings were ordered repaired or renovated.

Of the evicted people, some 50 families were sent to the newly-constructed Jordan Downs public housing development at 2114 E. Century Blvd., in Watts.

At the same time, African Americans filed several lawsuits challenging restrictive housing covenants.

During one unsuccessful lawsuit, Floyd Covington, city Housing Authority member and executive director of the Los Angeles Urban League, testified that only Little Tokyo and the surrounding vacated homes of Japanese Americans had opened up to African Americans since 1940.

By 1944, however, the sheer number of African Americans was forcing open restricted areas. White residents fought back by attempting to convince their white neighbors not to sell to blacks, however inflated the price; or buying out black residents that moved in; or in extreme cases, by violence.

Supervisor Ford, whose district included Bronzeville/Little Tokyo, even received a request from white resident Noel Edwards to sign a petition that would exclude non-Caucasians from a Los Angeles neighborhood. In response, Ford returned the petition unsigned and urged Edwards to reconsider circulating the petition. In Ford's May 10, 1944 letter to Edwards, he wrote: "Admitting that this race relation is a complex problem, I cannot believe that condemning all people as being unworthy to be our neighbors because they are not Caucasians, is the way to solve the problem. It takes me right back to Hitler and his terrible, insane crusade to make the Aryan race the master race."

As Los Angeles continued to tackle the housing crisis, the People's Daily World newspaper published a three-part series

in June 1944 on African American housing in Los Angeles. Reporter Mary Sanz started part two with rhetorical questions that described the situation:

"Have any of you war workers who are looking for a house ever slept in your car, or in a flea-hop theater or the Union Station? Have you lived 10 or more in one room? Do you and your family sleep in a corridor-space marked off by a lace curtain? Have you built a cardboard tent in somebody's yard that fit you like a suit the morning after the rains came? Do you sleep in a hot bed? (You get out, I come in). Or have you awakened on a morning in a drafty garage to find your baby's face swollen with spider bites? If not, then you're probably not one of the 7000 Negro war workers who have applied to the War Housing Center on Central avenue and haven't yet found adequate housing."

In an August 23, 1944 letter from Supervisor Ford to B.C. Miller, County Committee for Interracial Progress chair, Ford is disturbed to learn that the congested living conditions of African Americans had not improved and that the Emergency War Housing Center on Central Avenue had, at that time, more than 12,000 African American applications for housing. Ford further lamented that the completion of a 1,000 unit housing project for African Americans would not solve the problem and leaned on Miller to notify others in authority about the seriousness of the African American housing situation.

1945

In 1945, the substandard African American housing conditions received national attention when the Nation magazine published Dorothy W. Baruch's article titled, "Sleep Comes Hard" in their Jan. 27, 1945 issue. Baruch's article focused on Bronzeville/Little Tokyo, which she described in this way:

"In place after place children lived in windowless rooms, amid peeling plaster, rats, and the flies that gathered thick around food that stood on open shelves or kitchen-bedroom tables. Ordinarily there was no bathtub; never more than a single washbowl or lavatory. Sometimes as many as forty shared one toilet. Families were separated only by sheets strung up between beds. Many of the beds were 'hot,' with people taking turns sleeping in them."

By January 1945, the U.S. government was also allowing Japanese Americans to return to the West Coast, exacerbating the housing problem.

The Home Protective Association, headed by California Eagle publisher and editor Charlotta Bass, foresaw the potential for African American/Japanese American conflict, and passed a resolution in January recognizing the Japanese American right to their properties and requesting the government for more housing.

The following month, on Feb. 24, 1945, a "Housing and Racial Discrimination" conference focused on housing problems facing African Americans, Asian Americans and Latino Americans in Los Angeles. The event was co-sponsored by the following: National Lawyers Guild Los Angeles chapter, Council for Civic Unity, Interracial Council of the Church Federation, Catholic Interracial Council, NAACP, Urban League of Los Angeles, Home Owners Protective Association, National Origins Counsel of America, National Citizens Political Action Committee, Conference of Studio Unions AFL, Los Angeles Industrial Union Council CIO, Hollywood Democratic Committee, Hollywood Women's Council, American Civil Liberties Union, American Veterans Committee and the YWCA.

On March 8, 1945, Mayor Bowron called the first of several Special Committee on Housing Emergency meetings to tackle how to house war workers, white and black; returning discharged soldiers and Japanese Americans; and veterans and their families moving out to Los Angeles who had not lived in the Southland prior to the war.

At an April 9, 1945 mayor's meeting, the special problems of African American housing was discussed. The report came up with the following figures:

New housing available to African Americans April 1940-April 1945

2,257 " Under City Housing Authority
 350 " Under County Housing Authority
 6,000 " Estimated former Japanese American residences occupied by African Americans
 2,200 " Priority housing to African Americans built or was being built under National Housing Agency
 1,000 " Estimated houses purchased by African Americans
 11,807 " Estimated Total Housing Available
 11,193 " Estimated African American housing deficit

On July 9, 1945, Dr. George Gleason, secretary of the Los Angeles County Committee for Interracial Progress, released a report titled, "Housing for Negroes in Los Angeles County." The figures are very similar to the Mayor's with only slight variations. Gleason's numbers were released to the media.Â

New housing available for African Americans from April 1940-July 1945:

2,840 " Under City Housing Authority
" 350 " Under County Housing Authority
5,000 " Estimated former Japanese American residences occupied by African Americans
2,377 " Priority housing to African Americans built or was being built under National Housing Agency
1,000 " Estimated houses purchased by African Americans
11,567 " Estimated Total Housing Available
11,433 " Estimated African American housing deficit

In the U.S. government's post-war report on Japanese Americans, it was noted that some Japanese Americans were dealing with the housing shortage by taking on jobs that provided housing such as live-in gardeners or domestics.

"Sometimes this means the dispersion of families. A couple lives and works at one place, their daughter at another, and their son has a room downtown near the shop that employs him" ("Impounded People: Japanese Americans in the Relocation Centers," published by the United States Department of the Interior, War Relocation Authority's Final Report #3).

The government report also noted that although the WRA, in conjunction with the Federal Public Housing Authority, had provided temporary housing projects for the returning Japanese Americans, these housings were substandard and in inconvenient locations. The report described this as "the final 'pushing around' they suffered at the hands of the WRA."

In September 1945, Hubert Sanders, represented by African American attorney Loren Miller, won a victory against a race restriction covenant that lay between Jefferson Boulevard and Slauson Avenue and between Figueroa Street and Avalon Boulevard. Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Thurmond Clarke ruled that the 25-year-old restrictive covenant was no longer valid due to the changing character of that neighborhood.

A few years later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1948 *Shelly v. Kraemer* and the 1953 *Barrows v. Jackson* cases, abolishing all racial restrictive housing covenants.