

Other Japantowns

The World War II phenomenon of thousands of African American war workers crowding into vacated Japanese American districts was not unique to Los Angeles.

Similar patterns played out in other Japantowns up and down the West Coast, as war industry companies demanded workers but restrictive housing covenants prohibited African Americans from living in most white neighborhoods.

The two largest Japantowns, located in Los Angeles and San Francisco, received the most media attention due to their urban settings and the sheer number of African Americans that occupied the two districts.

Frank J. De Andreis, California Division of Immigration and Housing assistant chief, deplored the living conditions in San Francisco's Japantown in a letter, dated June 6, 1944, to John W. Beard, manager of the San Francisco Housing Authority:

"The house is one of those former places evacuated by the Japanese. That the place should have been condemned, there is not a question of doubt - it is positively filthy, with no running water and consequently no functioning toilets. The family is obliged to use the conveniences of a neighbor, and that is not always feasible with young children, with the possibility always prevalent of the pollution of the premises. With no water, of course, there are no bathing facilities and the resulting odors are conclusive of the fact that bathing is an (sic) unfrequent luxury."

The People's Daily World newspaper published several articles focusing on the substandard living conditions of African American war workers. Mary Sanz, from the People's Daily World Los Angeles Bureau, wrote a three part series in June 1944. Â

A year earlier, in a June 5, 1943 People's Daily World article, Sue Barry reported on the Fisher family, who had moved from Texas to San Francisco. The family of four lived in a cramped single room at 1663 Laguna, in San Francisco's Japantown. Lulu Fisher had a two-year-old daughter, which Barry described in this way:

"The child was covered with flea bites which became infected, and she grew listless and puny. Finally in desperation Mrs. Fisher had to send her back to relatives in Texas."

However, the overcrowding slum conditions in the smaller Japantowns were no different. In an Oct. 18, 1943 letter to California Gov. Earl Warren, Walter Koetitz, chief of California Division of Immigration and Housing, wrote about cleaning up the Vacaville, Calif. Japantown, which was a pre-war Japanese American farming community:

"At the present time we are having some difficulties in Vacaville pertaining to Jap Town, which was abandoned and is now being occupied by war workers. This Jap Town is a disgrace, and we are instituting abatement procedure, but we have no idea where the workers with their families will go."

Page 11 of a 1943-44 Biennial Report by the California State Division of Immigration and Housing states:

"The matter of housing the thousands of Negroes who have recently migrated west to work in war jobs is rapidly crystallizing into a problem that calls for immediate attention. This colored exodus is unprecedented in the annals of our time, and while the Federal Government, through various housing projects, is trying to alleviate the need, that effort is only a miniature one in the light of the number of colored people that are flocking here.

"Negroes are moving into the deserted Japtown districts of our metropolitan centers in vast numbers, and conditions of sanitation are generally poor, and overcrowding is a major difficulty....We have succeeded in cleaning out several of the smaller abandoned Japtown districts throughout California, and through abatement and misdemeanor prosecutions, we have had a large number of old dilapidated frame shacks razed to make way for new buildings."

Such wartime state efforts completely destroyed the smaller Japantowns such as those in Vacaville, Stockton, Guadalupe, San Luis Obispo, etc., that dotted the West Coast before the war.

Any remaining Japantowns were further compromised after the war when redevelopment efforts swept through the West Coast, and Japantown properties became precious commodities to be taken away through eminent domain procedures. Little remains of 15 blocks of Sacramento's Japantown, which was decimated under the mantle of redevelopment. Seattle's Japantown survives today as part of the International District.

Today, only three Japantowns - Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose - remain. What their future will be remains to be seen, particularly as chain stores and market rate condominiums encroach into the district.