

F.P.A. D

Keisha (Chris) Williams

Peninsula Neighborhoods

Palo Alto Park: Where workingmen are living

5-10-79

This is the eighth installment in a 10-part series — two a week — on Peninsula neighborhoods and what they mean to their inhabitants. Today: Palo Alto Park in East Palo Alto.

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By Richard Hanner
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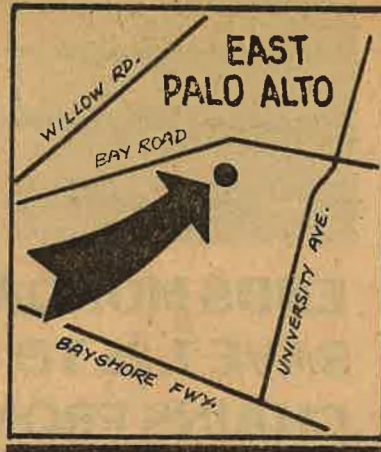
EAST PALO ALTO — Palo Alto Park is a workingman's neighborhood.

It is a place where welders and teachers and mechanics come to raise their families. There are tall trees and vacant lots. The streets are winding and fairly quiet so the kids can cruise along on their bikes, laughing as they dodge mud puddles.

Many of the compact, sturdy houses here still sell for under \$50,000.

There are working couples and retirees and singles in Palo Alto Park. But families have been the life's blood of this tree-shaded pocket of East Palo Alto, and they probably will continue to be, since it is one of the few neighborhoods on the Peninsula where a man who wears a blue collar and has a wife and two kids can afford to buy a home.

America's neighborhoods have long been the bedrock of its cities.



But with crumbling institutions and what many people perceive as the decline of the family, what has become of this basic American institution? Has future shock made it obsolete, or has it adapted and evolved into new forms? Palo Alto Park has changed markedly in the past decades. But like countless other neighborhoods, it has undergone major changes and survived.

Palo Alto Park seems to rebuke the image of East Palo Alto as a community lacking everything but drugs and crime.

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Chris Williams lives on Lilac Lane in Palo Alto Park, and there is an unusual car, an Italian Lancia, in mint condition.

Times Tribune Staff Photo by Tom Bullock

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Williams visits them often, sometimes with students. She glows as she tells of a recent impromptu field trip initiated by students.

"I love living on the bay," she said. "Did you know that sometimes, just sometimes, you can see seals? A few of the kids told me about some seals, and we rode our bikes on the back roads way, way back there. We hid our bikes in the tall grass, and we hiked to this beach, where we saw a mom and some pups."

Local residents say the proximity to the Bay creates a steady breeze that cleans the air. Many years ago, there was a billboard that stretched across the Bayshore Freeway in Redwood City that read: "Climate Best By Government Test."

According to local historian Miriam Turner, those

"government tests" were conducted in East Palo Alto. She and numerous residents subscribe to a theory the bay water keeps East Palo Alto cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

The lack of obstructions between San Francisco and East Palo Alto offers the neighborhood the best television reception on the Peninsula, she said.

It was the balmy climate, along with the affordable housing, that prompted Bill Arnick to bring his family from San Francisco to Palo Alto Park in 1968. Arnick, his wife, Ernestine, both 38, and their two sons, Deroid, 12, and Alquor, 17, live in a beautifully maintained home on Weeks Street, just behind Ms. Williams' house on Lilac Lane.

An aquarium bubbles quietly in one corner of the

living room, the boys' athletic trophies glisten atop a stereo stand and a chess set is on display on the coffee table.

It is the house of a hard-working, law-abiding family, the type of family that is the backbone of Palo Alto Park.

The house, inside and out, is a reflection of Arnick. He is a meticulous man, a general engineer and contractor. He wears a perfectly trimmed moustache and a goatee, and he has sharp, probing eyes, and a mind to match.

His wife, a quiet, calm woman, rocked gently in an easy chair while he talked.

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Williams (Chris) Keisha

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The moderate climate by the Bay is well-suited to the cultivation of everything from carnations to cauliflower. The residents enjoy the best television reception on the Peninsula, and the neighborhood, say residents, is immune from the snobbery some residents say is widespread in the cities around it.

For a blue-collar neighborhood, Palo Alto Park has some surprisingly aristocratic roots.

It is actually the core of what was once called Ravenswood, founded in 1850 as the first "planned community," in San Mateo County.

Ravenswood was supposed to serve the lumber and dairy industry in the vicinity. It fizzled when Isaiah C. Woods, the monied mastermind, suffered financial troubles and reportedly fled the country.

Later, the neighborhood served as a weekend retreat for San Franciscans lured by the temperate weather and gracious, halcyon surroundings.

Edward Donohoe, the son of one of the area's biggest landowners, built a huge, circular swimming pool on his property. The land was later purchased by several persons, including a former governor of California, Henry Haight. The swimming pool at one time was used as a reservoir to irrigate adjacent prune and strawberry crops.

After being open to the public from 1949-53, the pool was closed permanently.

Today, the silver of Palo Alto Park along Weeks Street and Lilac Lane has a rural, somewhat ramshackle, appearance. Its most prominent feature is the huge, beautiful native oaks sprinkled amidst fragrant pines and trees dripping with lemons and oranges.

Where wagons laden with lumber once rumbled along the dirt roads, there are pickup trucks and station wagons now.

In one driveway on Lilac Lane in Palo Alto Park, there is an unusual car, an Italian Lancia, in mint condition. It has an unusual owner.

Chris Williams is a science teacher in the Ravenswood School District. A smiling, gentle woman, she eschews a chair, preferring instead to sit casually on the carpeted floor of her house, surrounded by books, plants and mementoes of her extensive travels.

She said she built the Lancia virtually from scratch, installing the engine, putting in new upholstery, interior appointments, doing body work and giving the car a fresh paint job.

Ms. Williams came to Palo Alto Park in 1972 from New York City, where she taught school for seven years after attending the Bank Street School of Education. She paid \$17,000 for her spacious, airy home on Lilac Lane, and has come to love the neighborhood.

"I'm very, very happy living here. I wouldn't live anywhere else on the Peninsula," she said. "The only real problem is the burglaries, and I think that's due to the social situation with our young people."

She acknowledges that burglars have struck her home, but while she is concerned about the problem, she bears no anger toward those responsible.

"I think the unemployment is directly related to the burglaries," she said. "Our young men have a very hard time finding jobs. They have an awful lot of pressure put on them, and it seems that sometimes they turn to burglary just to survive."

Threat of burglary aside, Ms. Williams can find no fault with the neighborhood. It is dominated, she said simply, by "people who pay their bills."

It is not a place for coffee klatches or where neighbors show slides of Hawaiian vacations, but it is a friendly neighborhood where the residents smile and nod at one another on the street. And it is a place where neighbors respect the wishes of those who cling to privacy.

The baylands are only blocks away, and Ms. Wi-

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"Now you've got more people coming in here buying houses," Arnick said. "In the last three or four years, I've seen the neighborhood bud out like a blossom."

More whites, Asians and Hispanics are coming into the neighborhood now, Arnick said, diluting the heavily black composition.

According to one community official, the neighborhood is now only about 50% black.

Arnick said a burglary epidemic that started several years ago has subsided, and there have never been many serious crimes in the neighborhood.

Although some residents regard the lack of sidewalks as a quaint and desirable rural vestige, clouds of dust are created along the roadways in the summer, leaving a thin red film on the houses. Arnick said he has to "hose down the house two or three times a week, and you've got to paint the house every two years, instead of every five years."

Work on street improvements has commenced on the far side of East Palo Alto, he said, and is progressing across the community like a slow tide.

"I think in another 10 years, they'll probably be through here, at the rate they're going," he said.

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According to Arnick, the neighborhood is woefully devoid of recreational facilities.

"They got a lot of vacant lots around here that could be turned into parks," he said.

The paucity of recreational resources and the potholed streets are stark evidence the neighborhood, like all of East Palo Alto, is unincorporated.

"Those things wouldn't be happening if we had a city," Arnick said.

What concerns Arnick the most, though, is not the lack of picnic grounds or the dust on his house. It's the education of his sons. Both are bused out of the community to schools in adjoining cities, and Arnick claimed the boys would learn better if they stayed closer to home.

Arnick brought his family into East Palo Alto after the process of "blockbusting," had transformed the ethnic complexion of the community from white to black in a short decade. According to Mrs. Turner, blockbusting was practiced by rapacious realtors who would swarm into a neighborhood, hoping to create a stampede by warning the white residents that blacks were seeping into their neighborhood.

"They'd say, 'you better watch out, the niggers are moving in, and you better sell while the selling's good,'" said Mrs. Turner, a long-time resident of East Palo Alto and civil rights activist.

Despite attempts by Mrs. Turner and others to halt the white exodus, blockbusting was successful, and by the mid-60's, what had been a predominantly white neighborhood was predominantly black.

A few doors away from the Arnicks lives a woman who came to East Palo Alto long before the ethnic flip-flop started. She is a modest woman who did not want her name in the newspaper. But she has seen the Palo Alto Park neighborhood evolve since the 1940s, when it was still a refuge for city dwellers, and she agreed to share her observations.

She and her husband built the handsome stucco home near the end of Lilac Lane in 1940 as a weekend retreat. They moved in permanently a few years later. Since her husband's death, she has survived by herself.

"I like the climate here," she said. "I have good neighbors, and it's getting better. There aren't as many burglaries here anymore. I haven't been bothered, knock on wood," she said, clenching her gnarled hands and pounding firmly on the mahogany coffee table in front of her.

"I spend a lot of time trimming my hedge and tending my garden. I see who's coming and going," she said. "You don't see all the hoodlums you used to. I guess they're all in jail. My family tried to get me out of here.

"But I have no fear. No fear at all."

New houses are sprouting up in the neighborhood now, she said, and more whites are moving in.

"They're building a lot more now. And it's hard to get rentals now. A lot of the old timers like me are passing on. It's almost all new people," she said.

She brought out faded photos of the sun-washed stucco in its prime, a rock-solid house planted beneath towering oaks. A stout bull terrier stands proudly in the driveway.

"We never had any children, so we thought we'd have some little pets," she explained.

Later, she walked slowly through her garden, which was surprisingly unchanged from the way it appeared in the 30-year-old photos.

She looked out over the fecund soil and the huge oaks, and her eyes shone with a mixture of strength and sensitivity.

"This is a beautiful place. I get along with everybody. I treat people like I would like to be treated. After all, we're all God's children."

Next: Portola Valley