East Palo Alto:

History and Incorporation

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"It is with extreme pleasure and a signal honor to report to you that on Tuesday, January 27, 1987, in the nation's capitol, Washington D.C., the United States Supreme Court denied without comment review of a petition for certiorari in the case of Wilks versus Mouton. By this act, this august body sent a message throughout this grand and glorious land of ours that EAST PALO ALTO IS A CITY FOREVER! Praise God's Holy Name!"

-Barbara Mouton, Mayor of East Palo Alto, Larch, 1987

The Court's denial to review <u>Wilks v. Mouton</u> not only concludes East
Palo Alto's three-and-a-half year struggle to have fully sanctioned the legality
of its incorporation, it also marks the beginning of a new epoch in the history
of the city; it can now carry on the fuctions of self-governance vithout the
threat of a sudden loss of its sovereignty loaming over it.

Before we discuss the details and importance of East Palo Alto's incorporation it is important to bring to light some of the details of the areas history for these will help us get a better understanding of why incorporation for the city was so significant. Visitors and residents of East Palo Alto and Palo Alto. the city boardering to the West, cannot help but be surprised by the large contrasts between the two municipalities. Palo Alto is predominantly white, middleupper class while East Palo Alto is about 70% black with a mean income of about \$20.000. The streets of Palo Alto are smooth, well-paved, and side-walked while many of those of East Palo Alto lack sidewalks and are full of potholes and patches. Yet, as the saying might go, "Don't judge a town by its street cover" and to gain a full appreciation for East Palo Alto again we turn to history. It is convenient to divide this history into two segments: from first settlement to the mid-1950's, when large numbers of blacks began moving to the area, and then from the region that I the present. Cur treatment of the first segment will be of a more thromological nature, whereas with the second segment we will feeus more on the diverse forces esting from without and within that shared and changed the

community. It should be said that our treatment will be topical and far from thorough but that an effort has been made to focus on those events and processes that were most seminal in terms of the important aspects of East Palo Alto's development and in terms of its efforts to incorporate.

Origins to the kid-1950's

As we might expect, the earliest inhabitants of the area of East Palo Alto were California Indians and in fact until recently it was the site of the oldest known settlement in the Bay Area. The area was then contained in the Rancho de las Pulgas established late in the eighteenth century by the Spanish government in Mexico. The first white settler was Isiah C. Woods who, with the help of Adams and Company, a San Francisco bank of which he was a partner. purchased the south-eastern part of the Rancho and in 1848 established a town next to the bird-filled marshlands of the south Eav. "To pay tribute to himself he joined his name to that of the black birds and called San Mateo 'County's first town 'AAVENSWOOD'."8 In 1849 a wharf was constructed where Bay Road met the bay and this allowed for shipping of lumber from Searsville and Woodside, where Bay Road presumably began. However, Woods had greater hopes for the area since the Pacific and Atlantic Railroad Company had recently made plans to build a bridge over the Bay through Ravenswood. 10 The plans were abandoned and then resumed in 1851 and this time "Woods pointed out that Ravenswood would become the Western Terminus, another San Francisco."11 Considerable investment was fueled and hotels, salcons and houses sprung up. When. in 1854. the Railroad abandoned its plans to build the bridge Adams and Co. went bankrupt, and "The town of Ravenswood became a ghost town, with the wharf the only construction being of any use."12

the whirf and almost 3000 acre of last north-east of the San Franciscuite

Creek (the south-west boundary of East Palo Alto today) were purchased by two San Francisco land speculators, William Fox and Cornelius Peter O'Conner, in 1854. Just previous to this, in 1852, a Joshua Leavitt had rented 1500 acres of land from Charles C. Bowman, one of the original parners in Adams and Cc., and Leavitt proceeded to build barns and establish a dairy farm the products of which were shipped to San Francisco and San Jose. An additional 400 acres of land was purchased by Leavitt from Fox and O'Conner where more barns were built. The land was also used by Leavitt's son, Joshua Jr., to start a chicken farm. Unfortunately, Josh Jr.'s experimental "steamhead" incubation process failed and "helped cause the downfall of his new enterprise." Joshua Sr. sold the land to Lester P. Cooley in 1868.

Cooley had come across in covered wagon in 1859 to seek gold in the Sierras. After a successful year he managed to establish a dairy ranch in San Francisco. In 1867 he decided to move south and establish a new dairy. Cooley purchased the 400 acre lot mentioned above and proceeded to improve it by building new barns, drilling a water well, and by refurbishing the neglected Ravenswood wharf of which he had purchased the rights to half. It was re-christened "Cooley Landing", its name today. The farm was very successful and Cooley became quite wealthy, providing nicely for his wife and three sons until his death in 1882.

During these years railroad interest was again focused on Ravenswood when in September, 1872, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors sent a bill to the mayor which he put to a popular vote that posted a "\$12,000,000 subsidy necessary for the completion of the San Francisco and Colorado-Ravenswood Railroad Bridge." Similar to the proposal of 1851, this trans-bay route v.s nineteen times less expensive than a proposed Yerba-Buena island route to the north and only nine miles lenger. Though favored greatly throughout San Fitch I mate, the

San Francisco voters, fearing increased taxes, voted it down. But while the Railroad plan failed, a relatively successful Ravenswood venture was that of the Hunter and Shckleford Brick Factory opened in 1874 on five acres of land that these men had purchased from Cooley. At its peak in 1875 the factory turned out 8,000,000 bricks that year and employed 100 Chinese workers. Since the bricks were shipped by boat, Cooley Landing was quite active and Cooley agreed to keep the pier maintained. In fact, the dock was so active that one Jeremiah Clarke built a second pier, "Clarke's Landing", in 1873 to ship what he hoped would be the goods of a burgeoning Ravenswood industrial center. In 1884 partly as a result of declining sales and partly from an exhaustion of natural clay supplies, the factory shut down and activity at Cooley's Landing decreased precipitously with only a very occasional lumber barge stopping there to ship wood from Page's Mill, itself a victim of dwindling natural resources: the depletion of lumber from Woodside and Searsville by 1870. Clarke's Landing also deteriorated and was not improved until 1931 when the city of Palo Alto, who had purchased it and the surrounding land in 1921, converted it into a yacht harbor and the land around it into a dump, both still existing today. This was one of the first annexations, a process that will become more and more important, as we will see. 17

Until around 1910 Rivenswood was relatively inactive. The two piers were occasionally used by their owners; the Morgan Oyster Company (est. 1874) farmed beds off Ravenswood with moderate succes until large quantities of oil (from steamers) and refuse (from cities) made the environment deadly to the shell-fish; and the big Ravenswood landowners, the Cooleys and the Kavanaughs used their land to farm and raise stock. 18 However in 1910 the Dumbarton Train are was finally opened establishing a shorter (by twenty-six miles) route between takkland and San grancisco and other sest and so a bay cities. Fartly

as a result of this new transportation artery, a Charles Weeks in 1999 purchased land, part of it from the Cooleys, and "subdivided (it) into 1.5 acre farms and called the section 'Runnymeade' after the historic English meadow where the Knight of old wrested the Magna Carta from King John." Weeks sold the plots as "family chicken farms under the concept of 'one acre and independence'." Although, "Runnymede was one of many utopian schemes in California founded on the belief that rural life was superior, that small plots of land intensively farmed could produce the necessities of life, as well as the serenity that came only come from independent labor," this same source continues, "This was hardly a utopia for the poor, however, since plots of land...had to be purchased in advance. A 1917 advertisement said the plots were 'especially adapted to people of means who wish a pretty setting for a garden home."

At the same time as the Runnymede subdivisions were laid, so were new lots sold and purchased in Ravenswood proper; and in 1925 a conflict erupted over the name of the newly settled area. A vote was held and the name East Pale Alto was chosen. Yet though united in name, the two communities were not so in reality: "Separate chambers of commerce survived until the late 1930's and throughout this period the Pale Alto City Directory recognized distinct municipalities." During this period, in 1935, the two towns discussed incorporation as a means to curtail the blooming retail liquor industry affectionately called "Whiskey Bulch". It came to nothing. In addition, the chicken farms, as a result of the depression, declined during the 1930's. "By the early 1940's, neither chamber of commerce existed and much of the poultry colony was being divided into houning tracts."

For some reason detailed sources for the period of the 1930's and 194's are lacking, but we do learn the following: As a result of the decline of the enriched furns andivisions were laid in the early 1940's though taken.

very little economic growth until the end of world har II. 27 After the war the influx of veterans into inexpensive homes ("lower-middle class") caused the population in the area to increase sharply to 8000 by the late 1940's. Large tracts were used for flower growing. 28

What can we interpret from the first century of the area's history? Rob Lowe says that,

"Even had there been greater continuity in population and leadership, the historic organizations, devoted mostly to rural pedestrian concerns...had little of value to impart about the preservation and development of urban wealth."

This is only a partial and, in a sense, misleading explanation because we have seen, clearly, various attempts in the area to establish a healthy economic base. We saw, for example, rapid growth at the community's inception in the 1850's that might well have continued had Isiah woods' prayers for a railroad line been answered. We also noticed that Jeramian Clarke's construction of a second pier in 1873 anticipated the growth of an industrial area started with the founding of the successful Hunter and Shackleford Brick Factory. As it happened, it never came. We might even hypothesize that had the poultry farms not been victim of the depression, early incorporation efforts might have been fruitful. Lowe's statement leaves out the fact, therefore, that genuine efforts were made to create a stable economic base, and of an urban nature in the case of our first two examples. If, as he implies, "the preservation and development of urban wealth" are crucial to the success of a city, then certainly we see historic evidence that whole-hearted efforts were made to accomplish this.

history, Lowe's interpretation seems to be correct because the fact is these efforts did fail and the area did remain largely regal without any long-standing industrial growth. Yet it is still only a raptial or landien, because we find other reasons for the area's non-growth. The trible may have been the fact

that much of the land remained in the hands of different wealthy families who did not reside in the area and probably had no concern for its fate other than to make the most of their land, for example by subdividing it and selling lots rather than encouraging business growth. In addition, the tension, whatever its reason, between Runnymede and Ravenswood, as we saw, made their unity in 1925 only nominal. The depression did not help matters either since what industry there was only further declined. All in all, it is a bit narrow to attribute !ast Palo Alto's failure to establish urban development simply to its devotion to "rural pedestrian concerns" for we witness a number of other reasons.

Since the 1940's 30

During the 1950's two processes occured that explain why the city of East Palo Alto is the way it is today: one was the movement of large numbers of blacks into the area, the other was a voracious consumption of its lands by stronger, surrounding communities, (though we have seen this before the 1950's, see page four). The growth of shipbuilding industries in Oakland and San Francisco during World War II attracted many blacks the South to these areas where jobs had become available. But the end of the War meant hard times for many of these blacks since the industries slowed greatly and these newer workers were the first to go. Black post-war unemployment rose to 30% in the Bay Area. As we noted before, housing in East Palo Alto was inexpensive and so it therefore was probably attractive adpoorer blacks desiring a home ("a small piece of the 'American dream'") in a sunny, semi-rural area. Even so, initially blacks were barred entrance from the area. In 1949 the Council for Civic Unity of Redwood City began to help clacks out. "This interracial civil rights organization encouraged waites to 'front' for blacks in the purchase of homes." (nce blacks local settling in the area the notorious "block-busting tactics of certain realtors" her noted that families were encouraged to sell their homes to

these realtors who then resold them to blacks at much higher prices. Whether fueled by racism or greater opportunity elsewhere, or both, in any case large numbers of whites were leaving the area by the mid-1950's. 32

As we noted (see endnote four), the East Palo Alto of today is only a tiny fraction of its former self. Here is a summary of the various processes that have shrunken East Palo Alto. In 1947 Bayshore Highway was widened into the Bayshore Freeway of today. Unfortunately, almost all East Palo Alto businesses were located along the highway and "Of the 53 businesses that were forced to relocate, only five chose to remain in the community."33 In addition. the Freeway created a kind of natural division between the "East of Bayshore" and "West of Bayshore" communities, a division that we will see was important in relation to incorporation. Next, in 1949 Menlo Park annexed Belle Haven and with it one-fourth of East Palo Alto's population. Soon after Menlo Oaks was annexed to Menlo Park, and North Palo Alto to Palo Alto. In 1954 the Bohannon development was annexed to Menlo Park as was a large industrial area in 1960. 35 Other annexations have included: the area presently comprising the Palo Alto Golf Course, the Palo Alto Dump (see page four), and the Leslie Salt Flats. 36 We are not so concerned with the exact details of these losses of land as with the fact that because East Palo Alto was a non-incorporated area of San Mateo County and so under the governance of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, it therefore was powerless to stop these annexations.

Before looking at incorporation it might be worthwhile to look briefly at a project that happened in East Palo Alto after the annexations but before incorporation that is evidence of the community's concern with helping itself:
The East Palo Alto Community Farm. For though in this period East Palo Alto was subject to the will of the capricious board of prervisors in nonetheless did not lay inte. In fact, the Farm was just one or many projects and developments of self-embetterment in this period. Others included the Matoto

Project (1968) - a law project, the Community Youth Responsibility Program (1970) - it helped problem juveniles, the construction of a Municipal Center (1972)39 to consolidate and centralize city services, and the list goes on. But the Farm is of particular interest, it seems, because it reflected many of the same values embodied in East Palo Alto's rural past and especially in the Runnymedie Colony half a century previous. Forty acres of open land at the end of University Avenue were donated by the Kavanaugh family in 1975 to the project, brainchild of Ida Berk, then Chairperson of the East Palo Alto Economic Opportunity Commision. Twenty-five of it were farmed co-operatively while the rest was divided into 20x40 foot family plots "designed to provide a family of four with all the produce they would need for one year."40 The Farm got money and help from a number of ouside agencies: San Mateo County Engineers, Webb Ranch, the University of California, seed companies, local nursuries, and others as well. Many of East Palo Altos' older residents coming from rural areas of the U.S. such as Oklahoma (see page seven) were experienced farmers and could teach as well. The Farm was quite successful but in 1980 the Kavanaughs decided to sell the land to a developer who planned to build warehousing. Interestingly, the farmers opposed the developers' plans but not the sale "because it would (have) hurt Kavanaugh to whom they said they (were) grateful."42 The Farm was inspiring to East Palo Altans and was, according to Berk, "being called the 'best thing that ever happened here'."43 But again we see the effect of being a non-incorporated area rather thank city since it is quite possible that a city council could have zoned the land 'agricultural" or simply have purchased the land flat-out and thus maintained the project.

Imporporation

the history of the attempts and the recent success to incorporate might

fill a book and we will here try only to point out the major themes that made up the issue, in particular those that bear some relation to the area's past. East Palo Alto has made several attempts to incorporate as 1 city; in 1935 as a result of liquor store proliferation (see page five), in 1954 because of the annexations, in 1958 for the sake of self-governance and improvements, and the issue was talked about almost incessantly during the 1970's. 44 Final, legal incorporation came after a major effort mounted by the East Palo Alto Committee for Incorporation begun in late 1980 and finally accoplished on June 14, 1983, the voter measure passing by a slim fifteen votes. Throughout the process legal challenges have been make by opponents, the last of vaich claiming that votes were cast illegally in the June 14 election. As we noted (see page one), the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

While the legal aspects of East Palo Alto's incorporation are of interest, we are more curious about what the underlying motives of each side were. Clearly, the most pressing reason for the proponents of incorporation is that a city is sovereign and able to control its lands and to a large extent how those lands are used and serviced. We have seen numerous examples of how non-incorporation has hurt the area in the past: shiftless realtor marrices, extensive annexations, loss of the Farm. Another reason for incorporation were the numerous code violations of city structures. The location of the County Services in Redwood City, fifteen miles to the North, made inspection are and in general landlords did little to improve buildings; nor could rent levels be controlled. In incorporated city could much more effectively enforce code violations and allow for rent control, proponents argued. Along with this, proponents of incorporation worried about the possibility of generification and other harm that the done to residents by landowners as a result in the fact that the

placement of residents.⁴⁸ Another issue surrounded police services since the area had always been patrolled by the San Mateo Count Sherrif's Department, whose officers were not East Palo Alto residents and had "extremely poor standing in the community."⁴⁹

Perhaps the biggest controversy surrounded financing the new city. We examined Lowe's idea that cityhooc had failed historically partly because the area never developed a stable, healthy economic base, and we concluded, with some qualifications, that this was more or less correct. One of the reasons people opposed incorporation was that they feared increased taxation. Most of the residents west of the freeway also opposed incorporation because they feared their mostly white area would be ignored by the larger west of the Freeway, minority part of East Palo Alto. Most of the former wanted annexation to Menlo Park. They also argued that East Palo Alto simply did not have enough of a tax-base to finance the new city although this does not seem to have been the case. However, it is fairly clear that the members of organizations such as WARPO (woodland Avenue Residential Property Owners) feared more potential rent control and zoning measures and more thorough enforcement of building codes, all of which would mean a loss of money for them in one way or another. 52

Also included in Lowe's hypothesis was the suggestion that, historically, a focus on "rural, pedestrian concerns" by city leaders led to ineffective governing. Likewise, opponents to incorporation pointed out that East Palo Alto's government had been ineffective and even corrupt in the recent mast, (though not, of course, because it spent too much time on rural issues). It was claimed, for example, that the Eunicipal Council had been turned into an "incirument for incorporation" rather than developing programs for the city. 53

Listly, there is the issue of race, which throughout the incorporation factule recent to simple beneat the surface. It is difficult to assess both the extent and virulence of the racism involved except to say that it was not

Perhaps a good gauge of the kind of racism involved is contained in a statement made by one of the west of Bayshore residents, Tom Fitzsimmons: "I don't have anything against them (East of Bayshore residents) wanting a voice in government... But if they incorporate, we would be losing ours." Fitzsimmons feared, as was metioned, that the minority majority to the west would simply rever elect a candidate from the east side and that the east's white population would have no say in the new government. The racism, then, seems to have existed on both sides of the tracks, so to speak; whether it is simply of a denographic nature as Fitzsimmons suggests, and not a deeper kind, is anybody's gress. In the end, the west part was incorporated with the east.

Conclusion

East Palo Alto is finally a legally incorporated city and is in the clear, no longer victim of legal challenges to it sovereignty. We have seen how economic, political, social, and ideological factors have affected the development and composition of the community, and how some of these factors have accounted for its repeated failure to "get it together" as a city. It seems appropriate to conclude that the citizens of East Palo Alto, though not free from the burden of their history, are at least now finally capable of dealing with its legacy by means of their own, collective will.

Endnotes:

- 1. Barbara Mouton, "Report from Mayor Mouton", City Connection Monthly Newsletter of the City of East Palo Alto, March, 1987, p. 1
- 2. Author's own observations as resident for eighteen years.
- 3. East Palo Alto Community Plan and EIR Hearing Draft, July 1981, pp. 1-12, 13.
- 4. The boundaries of the area we will consider have been far from stable. In the early period (1850-c. 1925) no evidence for strict boundaries was found, but in general the area was much larger that it is today. According to Bob Lowe, "In the late 1940's, East Palo Alto extended to Embarcadero Road in the south, Middlefield Road in the west, and to the Atherton boundary and even a bit of the Redwood City border on the north." (See note 18 below for citation.) Today East Palo Alto occupies 2.5 square miles.
- 5. Barb Bocek, graduate student in the Department of Anthropology of Stanford University, oral interview, May 28, 1987. She says that discoveries at the Stanford West site date to about 5000 years before the present. Bocek is a specialist on California Indians.
- 6. Ravenswood Post, East Palo Alto, CA, Wed., Nov. 13, 1968, p. 6.
- Anonymous, History of Ravenswood, p. 3. Neither the author nor the date nor even the correct title of this document is known. It is about 80 pages long and goes into magnificent detail about this early period. It is also quite well documented and I have attached a copy of the authors' sources so the reader can see this for himself. It almost surely dates from after 1941 but before 1945 since the author says in two places, "Since the outbreak of war with Japan,". If the document dates from after 1945 we would expect him to have said "forld War II". It will be cited as "Anonymous".
- 8. Ibid., p. 4.
- 9. Community Plan and EIR, p. 1-5.
- 10. Presumably, the bridge would have made Ravenswood a Bay transportation hub.
- 11. Freeman, Eleanor, Stories of San Mateo County, Harr Wagner Publishing Co. San Francisco, 1938, p. 133.
- 12. Anonymous, p. 49.
- 13. Ibid., pp. 8-10.
- 14. Ibid. np. 30-32.
- 15. Paid. 7) . 62-6

Endnotes (cont.):

- 16. Ibid., pp. 53-4, 70-1.
- 17. Ibid., pp. 72-4.
- 18. Ibid., p. 75.
 Lowe, Bob, "California Dream City: A History of East Palo Alto (part 1)"
 The East Palo Alto Progress, April, 1983, p. 4. This History appeared in five parts in the Progress in the months following, all written by Lowe. For the sake of simplicity, all other citations will simply give Lowe's name followed by the part and date, see note 21, for example.
- 19. Anonymous, p. 55.
- 20. Community Plan and EIR, p. 1-5.
- 21. Lowe, Part 1, April, 1983. Lowe seems to have gone a bit far in making this implication, because a considerable amount farm produce was shipped by the new bridge according to our anonymous source, (p. 56).
- 22. Lowe, Part 1.
- 23. Jacobs, Allan B., "Observing and Interpreting East Palo Alto", Working Paper No. 375, Institute of Urban and Regional Development, U.C. Berkeley, August, 1982, p. 32.
- 24. Lowe, Part 1.
- 25. Ibid.
- 26. This seems to be the case with what sources we have at hand; but this does not preclude the existence of more detailed sources elsewhere.
- 27. Lowe, Part 1. Jacobs, p. 32.
- 28. Community Plan and EIR, p. 1-5.

 San Matco County Community Book, 1972p. 35 Publisher not available, but probably some branch of the County Offices.
- 29. Lowe, Part 1:
- 30. Again, our sources here are rather thin until around the seventies.
- 31. Sterner, Wallace, "East Palo Alto", Changes in the Black Ghetto 1, Saturday Review, August 1, 1970, p. 12.
- 32. lowe, Part 3, June 1983, p. 4.
- 33. Ibrv. Lart 2, May 1983, p. 4.

Endnotes (cont.):

- 34. Jacobs. p. 32.
- 35. Lowe, Part 2.
 San Mateo County Community Book, p. 35.
- 36. Mouton, Barbara, oral interview conducted June 4, 1987.
- 37. Ibid.
- 38. Ibid. During this period (1967-1983) East Palo Alto had a Municipal Council but this only had an advisory role and the ultimate decisions lay with the County Foard.
- 39. East Palo Alto Municipal Council Report, 1968-1973, "A Five Year Report to the Community", Oct., 1973, pp. 4,8.
- 40. Farrell, Tom, title N.A., Menlo Atherton Recorder, Menlo Park, CA, Wed. July 30, 1975.
- 41. Canton, Carlene, title N.A., Palo Alto Times, Palo Alto, CA, Sat., June 21, 1975. p. 21.
- 42. Brown, Phyllis, "E. Palo Alto farm makes a comeback", Peninsula Times Tribune, Palo Alto, CA, March 11, 1981.
- 43. Gibbons, Ann, "Farmers opposed to project", Peninsula Times Tribune, August 8, 1980.
- 44. Lowe, Part 5, January 1984, p. 4.
- 45. City Connection, March 1987, pp. 1,2.
- 46. Mouton, interview.
- 47. "That People Want to Know About Incorporation: Thirty Key Questions", p. 2: this is a pro-incorporation document of the period, c. 1983.
- 48. Ibid.,p. 4.
- 49. Skidmore, David, "A new spirit in East Palo Alto", Stanford Daily, Stanford, CA, April 26, 1984.
- 50. Brown, Phyllis, "Property owner opposes East Palo Alto incorporation", Peninsula Times Tribune, Feb. 2, 1981, p. B-3C.
- 51. "What People Want to Know...", p. 1.
 Brown, Phyllis, "Day of decision for East Palo Alto", Peninsula Times
 Tribune, Harch 17, 1982, p A-1.
- 52. " not les le + nt To lnow...", p. 1,2. hrown, feb. 2, 1981.

Endnotes (cont.):

- 53. Wallace, Everlyn, "Cityhood Propaganda", letter to the editor, Peninsula Times Tribune, May 18, 1983.

 Brown, Feb. 2, 1981

 Brown, Phyllis, "Residents want to join Menlo Park", Peninsula Times Tribune, August 20, 1981. p. B-2C.
- 54. Brown, Aug. 20, 1981.