

E. Palo Alto coming of age — painfully

City's history a saga of unfulfilled promise

By Stephen Robitaille
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From its Gold Rush beginnings, East Palo Alto has been an area of great expectations. It has also been home to many broken dreams.

Take Isiah Woods, the banker who founded

the town of Ravenswood in 1849 and put his name on the new settlement. His town died six years later when a trans-bay railroad deal fell through.

Then came Charles Weeks, a utopian poultry rancher who founded the cooperative farming community of Runnymede in 1916. The colony, which boasted 1,200 residents and 100,000 laying hens, went bankrupt in the Great Depression.

Today, the mostly black and Hispanic city of East Palo Alto struggles to survive as it

seeks a place on the white, affluent Peninsula. The city, which has faced turmoil and financial troubles since its incorporation in 1983, is battling a budget deficit that could reach \$2 million by July.

As city officials race to cover the shortfall with tax proposals and new development, East Palo Alto citizens wonder: Can the city realize its dream of self-determination?

"America started off with an entrenched

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Plenty of dreams have died in East Palo Alto — now, it fights for its very existence as a city

Striving for self-determination

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band of people who went off and shouldered arms, drafted a Constitution and began to govern," said Councilwoman Barbara Mouton. "East Palo Alto is the epitome of what America's all about — people seizing control of their lives."

In 1849, when Isiah Woods looked out on the meadows of what was to be his new town, one of San Mateo County's first settlements, all he had was a wagon path called Bay Road and a plan.

Adams & Co., Banking and Express of San Francisco had obtained nearly 3,700 acres of the old Rancho de las Pulgas, and Woods, the company's president, saw the business prospects for a trans-bay rail bridge that would link the East Bay to the Peninsula.

He built a mansion and a boomtown that included a 75-foot wharf, shanties, stores, warehouses, even a hotel. He planned to ship the redwood being cut in Woodside and the hay, grain and vegetables that were sure to grow in the region's fertile soil.

Woods, struck by the flocks of ravens in the area, combined nature with vanity and called his town Ravenswood.

But the rail bridge was not to be built for another 56 years, and Adams & Co. failed in the banking panic of 1855. The San Mateo County sheriff sold Woods' holdings at an auction a year later.

However, farmers arrived and stayed, along with a smattering of wealthy San Franciscans who built vacation homes to escape the city's summer fog.

In 1868, Lester Cooley bought a 400-acre ranch along what is now University Avenue and Bay Road, which included Woods' old wharf. Renamed Cooley's Landing, the small port prospered until competition from Southern Pacific Railroad and the Port of Redwood City put it out of business in the 1890s.

Woodland Place

Ravenswood again reverted to a quiet town of farms and bourgeois country spreads. Woodland Place, an upscale subdivision offered by the Ravenswood Investment Co., for example, promised prospective buyers broad oaks, artesian wells and temperate climate on its five-acre lots.

The tract, which ran along University Avenue, offered something else as well, according to a 1907 brochure.

"Primarily designed as a place of residence and high-class homes," the brochure read, "there are provisions excluding forever the sale of liquor and the immigration of Negroes and Asiatics."

Lots apparently didn't sell that well, for within 10 years an unforeseen wave of new settlers had engulfed Woodland Place, drawn to a utopian agricultural cooperative that promised "one acre of land and independence."

The colony's founder was a chicken farmer from Indiana named Charles Weeks. He called his vision Runnymede.

"A living, breathing, organized cooperative community of intellectual American people, earning an honest living by intensive production on a small acreage, Runnymede is pointing the way to a higher independence for all people by intensive production in a practical common-sense way," wrote Weeks in his One Acre and Independence magazine.

A revolution in chicken-raising

Weeks moved to the area in 1909, where he perfected a method of raising chickens that required only compact, portable coops instead of big yards.

He preached a back-to-the-earth brand of socialism known as the "Little Lands" movement that was popular in California during the early 1900s.

Weeks bought 150 acres in 1916, divided the land into one-acre plots and began to proselytize. Chickens were the linchpin, and Weeks was the prophet.

He opened a real estate office, lectured at town meetings and sent out mass mailings. To ensure a "higher class of people," Weeks insisted that settlers pass a physical examination and pay \$600 cash for their one acre of freedom.

The first subdivision of Runnymede, named for the English plain on which the Magna Charta was signed, sold out in eight months.

By 1922, Runnymede boasted 640 acres, more than 220 families and 500 cases of eggs a week. In addition, there were pullets, squab, berries, mushrooms and fur-bearing rabbits. Eggs alone garnered \$400,000 a year.

The colony ran from San Francisco Creek to Bay Road, and from Pulgas Avenue to Menlo Park Avenue.

Runnymede employed cooperative buying and selling strategies. There was a poultry growers' association, a berry growers' association and boards of directors for both.

Weeks' downfall

Competition from large-scale poultry farms and the Depression finally ruined Weeks, said his sister, Amanda Collins.

"Charles is a wonderful man, simply wonderful," Collins said in a 1958 interview. "But he . . . well, he was a writer. Half of those who came here were city-bred, and a lot of them didn't have enough capital."

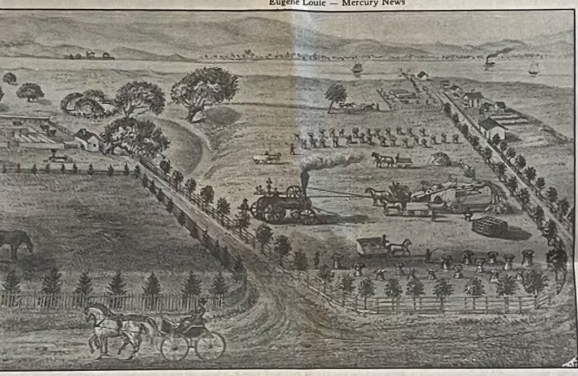
Weeks wound up in West Palm Beach, Fla., where he raised papayas and fishing worms and was one of the pioneers of the sport of skin diving. He died in 1964.

In the early 1920s, Runnymede residents began to clamor for incorporation as a city. This made Ravenswood residents, who held little truck with their widely-eyed socialist neighbors, nervous. A brouhaha soon erupted.

A 1925 incorporation vote failed, but a referendum on a compromise name change passed. The two communities would now be known as East Palo Alto.



Eugene Louie — Mercury News



residents had come from the South to the region's shipyards and auto factories.

There were jobs on the Peninsula, too — in hospitals, in the service industry, at the San Francisco International Airport. Ford Motor Co. moved its Richmond plant, which had a large black workforce, to Milpitas in the mid-1950s, and the workers followed.

However, there were no places in the South Bay where blacks could buy houses.

"My husband worked at the Ford plant, and he was getting tired of commuting from Richmond, but we couldn't buy in Milpitas," said educator and former East Palo Alto Councilwoman Gertrude Wilks. "We'd drive up to an open house, and they'd shut the garage door on our face."

Opportunities in East Palo Alto

The door, however, would open in East Palo Alto, where tract housing had begun to displace truck farms and hothouses.

Civil rights groups began to push for open housing — but it was the blockbusting and redlining tactics of real estate agents that would give East Palo Alto its black majority population.

"We were trying to find housing for people who lived in disadvantaged communities," said Ed Becks, 62, a former San Mateo county administrator and veteran civil rights leader. "But there was a concerted effort by the local real estate boards to exploit this situation."

In 1950, East Palo Alto had fewer than 2,000 residents and almost no blacks. By 1960, there were 15,000 residents, about 3,300 of them black. In 1970,

The Runnymede Club, above, was the center of the cooperative farming community in East Palo Alto in the early 1900s. At left, the intersection of Weeks Street and Clarke Avenue as it looks today.

Conducted by older students. Everyone was expected to graduate, go on to college and return to lead the city. The success stories piled up.

"I came here in 1967, and I found the people to be very warm, very friendly," said East Palo Alto Councilman Warnell Coats, who worked at the Nairobi shopping center supermarket while he attended college. "People were saying, 'You need to get an education and come back for the good of the community.' As the community passed through the 1970s and '80s, however, it fell on hard times. Federal aid programs dried up. Young people took advantage of opportunities elsewhere and moved away."

As East Palo Alto's fortunes declined, the drug trade mushroomed.

The supermarket at Nairobi shopping center, citing an inability to turn a profit, moved out in 1974. The center's smaller stores gradually closed, until only a liquor store remained. Drug dealers, derelicts and the homeless took over the shell, which itself became scarred by arson fires.

'The torch was not passed on'

"In the late '70s, when you would expect young blacks to be moving up in Silicon Valley, they weren't there. We didn't move into areas we should have," said East Palo Alto Councilman John Bostic. "What happened in the '70s and '80s is a disappointment. . . . But plenty of zeal remained for another issue — incorporation as a city."

Champions of cityhood had tried to incorporate East Palo Alto since the 1950s, saying they were tired of being ignored by county supervisors and manhandled by neighboring Palo Alto and Menlo Park.

"East Palo Alto was the bastard child of San Mateo County," said LaDoris Cordell, a Santa Clara County Superior Court judge who practiced law in East Palo Alto from 1977 to 1982. "It was not taken seriously. It was seen as a thorn in the side of the county."

In 1983, cityhood proponents won the fight for independence from San Mateo County by a 15-vote margin. But from the very start, the city of East Palo Alto had trouble.

The new city had a modest property tax base, a smattering of small businesses, a bustling drug trade, little government infrastructure and the lowest average income per person in the county.

Incorporation had divided the community. Renters, foreseeing the prospect of rent control, favored incorporation; some property owners, fearing high taxes, did not. Those rifts would widen in 1984 with the passage of the rent control ordinance and become the foundation of the city's vitriolic political factions.

The growth of East Palo Alto's black community coincided with the black pride movement of the 1960s. The community blossomed.

Cityhood opponents challenged the incorporation vote in court, alleging inequities by pro-cityhood forces in gathering absentee ballots. They hired former U.S. Rep. Pete McCloskey, who had represented the city in Congress, to handle the lawsuit.

McCloskey, once a strong supporter of incorporation for East Palo Alto, said he changed his mind once he realized the city lacked the resources to survive.

A confidential memo

"I saw a confidential memo from the assistant county manager saying there was \$22 million in road work that needed to be done and an annual \$1.5 million budget and why don't we just chuck off the whole thing," said McCloskey. "It just seemed to me that (East Palo Alto) was getting dumped."

The city won a three-year court battle, but the battle cost \$180,000 to fight and kept much-needed development away.

City officials also demonstrated an ability to create problems on their own.

In the first two years as a city, the council spent \$1.6 million more than it took in, chewing up the \$1.3 million surplus it got from the county under terms of incorporation.

Bookkeeping was haphazard and in some cases non-existent. The city owes \$1.2 million in bills from the two previous fiscal years. This year's deficit could hit \$750,000, and the specter of bankruptcy looms.

If the city becomes insolvent, it could file for bankruptcy under federal law, which would allow the city to schedule payments to creditors but remain incorporated. It could also go into state receivership, or back to unincorporated status under county control.

No matter what happens, the city's property owners probably would have to pay off the city's debts — and if they could not afford to pay, they could lose their property.

Despite its fiscal woes, East Palo Alto can point to some hopeful signs.

Citizens advisory committee report

In January, a citizens advisory committee completed a report that documented the city's past fiscal mistakes and made recommendations to alleviate the budget crisis. The group's work is seen as crucial: The group not only contained members of the city's warring factions, its recommendations were nearly unanimous.

City officials hope the committee's endorsement of a \$1.3 million tax ballot measure, which goes before voters in June, will give the measure a better chance of success than a similar council-sponsored measure that failed at the polls in November.

A drug task force formed last fall by county and state agencies has made progress against the drug problem.

The city is also beginning to lose its pariah status among local developers, entertaining proposals for an office tower and hotel complex, a 170-acre research park and an auto mall.

But it is too soon to tell whether these developments are the first glimpse of a happy future or a rerun of failed rail options, chicken farms and utopian dreams.

"Black people mirror America more than any other group," said Becks. "We are reflective of the example, on the one hand, of opportunity, and on the other that we have to pull ourselves up on our own."