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A History of East Palo Alto



Forward

Romic Chemical Corporation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the following for their assistance:

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Information was gathered from numerous sources, and details sometimes conflicted or were incomplete. We have striven to ensure accuracy, and regret any errors or omissions which may exist. If you are aware of any corrections or additions for future reference or reprints, please forward them to:

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The Changing Face of East Palo Alto

When Dorothy finally reaches Oz, she and her companions are drawn through the streets by "a horse of a different color," which changes hue in each scene. East Palo Alto has experienced similar frequent and rapid transformations during a history that is as distinctive and colorful as that horse.

While communities throughout the Bay Area have suffered the growing pains of urbanization and increasing population in recent decades, East Palo Alto has witnessed numerous additional changes which were as unique as they were extensive:

Identity. The town originally was called Ravenswood, then became East Palo Alto, and was nearly renamed Nairobi in 1968. It has also been known, informally, as Cooley's Landing, Weeks Poultry Colony, Runnymede and Palo Alto. It has been part of the larger areas of Rancho de las Pulgas, San Francisco County, San Mateo County and Menlo Park. Various districts, sometimes considered to be communities in themselves, were known as University Village, Palo Alto Gardens, Newbridge Park, Woodland Place, Palo Alto Park, Belle Haven, Bayshore Park, and others. The city is often mistakenly thought to be part of Palo Alto, although the two have always been separate entities.

Boundaries. For most of its history, East Palo Alto was part of unincorporated San Mateo County. As such, it did not have an official boundary until it incorporated in 1983. However, the area historically regarded as East Palo Alto was much larger than the city's current 2.5 square miles. (See map on page 12.) Large tracts were annexed by Menlo Park and Palo Alto from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.

Ethnicity. The original inhabitants were Ohlone Native Americans. Spanish ranchers took over, followed by Caucasian speculators and settlers. For a time Chinese laborers were

prevalent. Asian and Italian flower growers preceded the flood of middle-class Caucasians drawn to post-war housing developments. East Palo Alto later became the largest African American community on the peninsula. Today the city possesses a multi-cultural population which includes a large number of Hispanics and Pacific Islanders.

Commerce. Trade has alternately focused on ranching, transportation and shipping, brick manufacturing, farming, servicing travelers of Bayshore Highway and Dumbarton Bridge, and flower growing. At present there is a mix of small industrial, agricultural and commercial businesses.

These changes; and the population shifts that accompanied them, may be partially responsible for the notion that East Palo Alto lacks the kind of strong community identity possessed by its neighbors. Since it was founded around 1849, the town has experienced erratic growth and frequent conflict. Over the decades there has been rancor over lifestyles, schools, name changes, annexation, racial issues, incorporation, politics and development.

But some things have remained constant, namely the characteristics that have always attracted people to the area: the price of land and housing; a beautiful, rural-like setting; its centralized location; proximity to transportation and San Francisco Bay; and some of the most enviable weather in the nation.

The changing face of East Palo Alto is described in more detail in the following pages. The town's history is divided into 11 periods: Native Americans (1500 B.C. to 1700s A.D.), Rancho de las Pulgas (late 1700s to mid-1800s), Ravenswood (1849 to 1868), Cooley's Landing (1868 to 1900s), Early 1900s, Runnymede (1916 to 1930s), Business Districts (late 1920s to today), East Palo Alto (1950s to 1970s), Municipal Government (1966 to 1980s), Incorporation (1981 to 1987), and East Palo Alto Today.

Native Americans < 1500 B.C. to 1700s A.D. >

The earliest people to live in the area were the Ohlone, also called the Costanoos, Indians. Bands of this tribe populated present-day California from the Golden Gate to Big Sur some 3,000 to 3,500 years ago. They lived in huts made of grass and were a peaceful society of hunters and gatherers, until they were virtually wiped out in the late 1700s by European diseases and attempts to change their religion and lifestyle.

A burial mound was uncovered in 1951 during development of the University Village subdivision (see map), near today's aptly named Costano School. After a year-long excavation and examination of 60 graves and 3,000 artifacts, researchers concluded Native Americans had used the area as a cemetery and occasional camp site, rather than as a permanent settlement. In later years another mound was found near Willow Road and the railroad tracks.

Rancho de las Pulgas < late 1700s to mid-1800s >

Rancho de las Pulgas extended from present-day San Mateo to Palo Alto. Since the first European soldiers' and missionaries arrived more than 200 years ago, the area has been claimed by Spain, the Catholic Church, Mexico, the Arguello family, the United States, and numerous squatters who took advantage of its uncertain ownership. After years of legal wrangling which went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, title was awarded to the heirs of Luis Antonio Arguello, the first native governor of California. The victory was bittersweet, for the family was forced to sell much of the land to pay legal bills.

Legend has it that Rancho de las Pulgas (meaning Flea Ranch) derived its name from a passing band of Spanish soldiers who attempted to camp in some abandoned Ohlone huts. They promptly changed their minds and rapidly retreated, complaining loudly as they tried to fend off "las pulgas."

In 1848, a peace treaty was signed with Mexico, and California became part of the United States. The Gold Rush in 1849 influenced the area in several ways. It hastened statehood the following year and drew speculators to the peninsula. One of these was Isaiah Woods, who founded the town today known as East Palo Alto.

Ravenswood < 1849 to 1868 >

Around 1849 Isaiah Woods convinced his partners in the Adams and Company bank to invest in a town and wharf at the end of Bay Road. They founded Ravenswood, reportedly named for Woods and the crows that nested nearby. Subdivisions were laid out, and it became the first planned community in what later became San Mateo County (the area was part of San Francisco County until 1856).

A wooden pier was built at present-day Cooley's Landing (see map). The only port between San Francisco and the (then) state capitol of San Jose, it was used for both passengers and cargo. A few buildings — said to include a store, school, shacks, hotels and saloons — sprang up nearby. Woods confidently predicted Ravenswood would become a hub of commerce second only to San Francisco.

Woods had good reason to speculate. At that time the most convenient way to travel down the peninsula was by steamer from San Francisco to the new "Port of Ravenswood," where passengers took a stage coach to San Jose. The Central Pacific Railroad had plans to span the bay and build the westernmost stop of its "ocean to ocean" line in the little town. A San Francisco-San Jose track was proposed, with Ravenswood being one of its four stops. And the wharf was kept busy with lumber, hay and dairy shipments to San Francisco.

In 1853, the U.S. Coast Survey, as part of its survey of San Francisco Bay, erected a sandstone pillar near the present-day intersection of Gonzaga and Notre Dame streets. For nearly

100 years it marked the east end of the Pulgas Base, used to determine property boundaries. The monument was moved in 1951 and now sits at the north end of Jack Farrell Park (see map).

Woods' plans for Ravenswood were short-lived. A number of factors combined to spell the doom of the promising port-community. Oakland became the western terminus for the railroad, the trans-bay track was not laid until 60 years later, and the San Francisco-San Jose line was delayed and later bypassed the town. The state capital relocated to Sacramento. Redwood City replaced Ravenswood as the major lumber port on the peninsula. A gold mining slump threw San Francisco into a depression, and Woods' San Francisco bank failed in 1855. Legend has it Woods returned to his Woodside Mansion with embezzled funds and, after being forced at gun point to return \$80,000 to an irate investor, left the country.

Ravenswood became a ghost town. A half-interest in the port which sold for \$4,000 in the 1850s went for \$150 20 years later. By 1870 only foundations and the wharf remained of the original town. Like other parts of San Mateo County, Ravenswood became a destination for picnickers and a weekend country retreat for San Francisco residents.

Cooley's Landing < 1868 to 1900s >

In 1868 successful gold miner and dairyman Lester Cooley bought the Ravenswood wharf and more than 400 acres of bay-front property which stretched from present-day University Avenue to Embarcadero Road. He made extensive repairs to the pier, which became known as Cooley's Landing and was used primarily for shipping grain and products from the dairy he established.

But Ravenswood did not see a significant revival until 1874, when Cooley leased five acres to Hunter, Shackelford and



Courtesy of San Mateo County Historical Association

Lester Cooley revived the town of Ravenswood by restoring the wharf — afterwards called Cooley's Landing — and leasing land to a brick manufacturer.

Company. The firm built a brick factory where Jack Farrell Park is today. That same year Ravenswood became part of Menlo Park when it incorporated. Cooley was the second mayor and served until the city was disincorporated. (When Menlo Park reincorporated in 1927 its boundaries did not extend beyond Middlefield Road.)

The brick factory operated seven kilns, employed up to 100 Chinese laborers, and made as many as 50,000 bricks a day. These were shipped from Cooley's Landing to San Francisco to build the Palace Hotel. The plant's clay pit is still evident in the contours of the park.

Business looked so promising that a second wharf, Clarke's Landing, was built to the southeast. In later years it became the Palo Alto Yacht Harbor.

But once the hotel was complete business steadily declined, and the factory closed after 10 years. Cooley had died two years earlier during removal of a four-pound cancerous tumor. Ravenswood was abandoned once more, and the Cooleys, Carnduffs and Kavanaughs became the area's only permanent residents.

Early 1900s

A few noteworthy events occurred in the early 1900s. The Kavanaughs' farmhouse on Bay Road, currently used by the Community Law Project, was built around 1906. It is the oldest known structure in East Palo Alto today.

Southern Pacific Railroad finally built the first track to span the bay in 1910. For the first time, passengers could travel from the east bay to the peninsula without going through Santa Clara County. But the new line had little impact on the local economy. A cutlery manufacturer, Rodgers and Rodgers, operated briefly but unprofitably in the early 1900s.

In 1917 U.S. involvement in World War I instigated construction of a 100-acre military training center on Willow Road. More than 40,000 men passed through Camp Fremont. There were expansion plans for an officer's training school until the Armistice was signed in 1918. Later the camp was razed and its base hospital turned into a medical facility for veterans.

A few years earlier, Charles Weeks came to Ravenswood with a dream which continues to shape East Palo Alto today.

Runnymede < 1916 to 1930s >

Weeks was a visionary. He believed in applying scientific principals to farming and devised a poultry-raising method which concentrated birds in coops instead of allowing them to roam. In 1916 he founded Runnymede, also known as the Weeks Poultry Colony, in Ravenswood (see map).

Weeks named Runnymede after the meadow where the Magna Charta, which guaranteed basic rights for Englishmen, was granted. His utopian agricultural experiment was based on the concept that small farmers could support themselves on one intensively cultivated acre, thereby achieving independence and a quality of life superior to that in industrialized cities.

"One Acre and Independence" was Weeks' heavily promoted motto. Within 18 months it drew 60 families who paid cash for one- or five-acre plots. By 1922 Runnymede had 400 families raising chickens, rabbits, goats, fruits and vegetables on more than 640 acres in the heart of present-day East Palo Alto. School attendance grew from a handful of students to more than 300.

Runnymede consisted of long, narrow lots with single-story "garden homes," poultry coops which housed up to 2,500 birds, and two-story tankhouses which provided water. The community had a cooperative warehouse, store, marketing services, cannery and tannery, clubhouse (which still stands at Clarke and Weeks streets), school and park.



Courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association

Charles Weeks' poultry farm, as it appeared in the 1920s.

Ravenswood's population peaked at about 1,000 by the mid-1920s. But relations between the colonists and their neighbors were strained. There was a squabble over renaming the school district Runnymede. By 1925 it had escalated into a feud over what to call the town. In an informal December election the compromise choice of East Palo Alto won. (At the time it was thought that Palo Alto would annex the area, but although legislation was proposed, it was never acted upon.)

But unity was not achieved. The two communities continued to have separate Chambers of Commerce and were generally considered individual municipalities.

In a few years what was believed to be the largest poultry colony in the nation began to decline. By the 1930s several factors had combined to bring an end to this era in East Palo Alto history. Many of the one-acre farms eventually gave way to housing tracts. However, unlike most such colonies established on the West Coast in those years, numerous Runnymede-era structures and lots endure today.

At the same time, the wharf began to decay and Cooley's Landing became a county dump. By the late 1940s the port and Ravenswood's 19th-century buildings had disappeared.

Business Districts < late 1920s to today >

In 1927 private investors opened the two-lane Dumbarton toll bridge. Not yet linked to University Avenue, it brought heavy traffic to Willow Road. In its wake came businesses and housing, and the area was dubbed Newbridge (see map). Gas stations, cafes and other traveler-oriented enterprises did a thriving business until the San Mateo Bridge diverted much of the traffic. The drawbridge was purchased by the state in the 1930s and replaced by the existing Dumbarton Bridge in 1982.

In the 1930s much of East Palo Alto's business district was concentrated along the recently-constructed Bayshore Highway. It consisted largely of restaurants, gas stations and motels catering to travelers. Once Prohibition was repealed in 1933, several liquor stores, bars and night clubs sprang up, earning one area the name Whiskey Gulch (see map). It attracted people from Palo Alto, which was still "dry," as well as Bayshore travelers. Local residents complained of gambling and disturbances which occurred with increasing frequency.

The Depression and war years retarded further growth until the 1940s. The few Italian and Japanese flower growers who already operated in East Palo Alto were joined by others after World War II. Flowers became East Palo Alto's chief agricultural product. The small, family nurseries — numbering around 30 at their peak — eventually withered away due to dropping prices, increasing expenses, and foreign competition. Only four are active today — the oldest being Nakanishi Nursery, established in 1939.

Dairies and other businesses appeared following the end of World War II. In 1947 Hiller Aircraft Company became the first major industry to move to East Palo Alto. Located just



Courtesy of San Mateo County Historical Association

Although the businesses have changed, Whiskey Gulch buildings today look much as they did in 1940.



east of Willow Road, Hiller was one of only four companies in the world producing helicopters at that time, and the only aircraft manufacturer in the state. The company grew from a dozen employees to around 2,000.

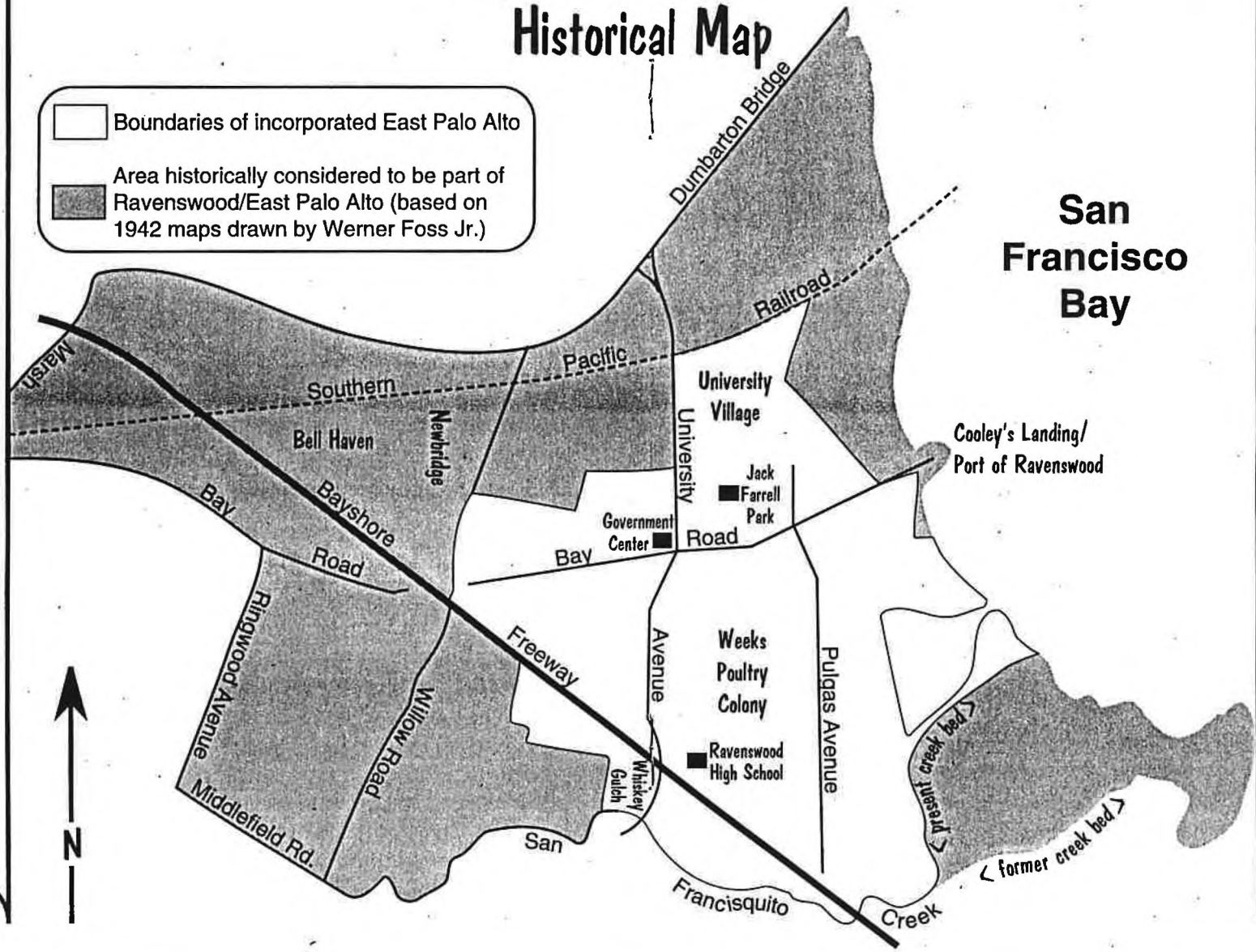
But in the next dozen years, widening of Bayshore Highway and annexation decimated East Palo Alto's business base. In 1949 and '59 Hiller and other companies and residences in Belle Haven and Newbridge were annexed into Menlo Park. The loss amounted to about one-fourth of the population and the property value historically considered part of East Palo Alto (see map).

When the University Avenue cloverleaf was built as part of the freeway project, more than 50 businesses were forced to relocate. Only five chose to remain. A replacement commercial area between University and Capitol avenues was planned, and homes were cleared to make way. But the business district never fully reestablished itself, and in 1958 another large industrial area was annexed into Menlo Park.

East Palo Alto

Historical Map

-  Boundaries of incorporated East Palo Alto
-  Area historically considered to be part of Ravenswood/East Palo Alto (based on 1942 maps drawn by Werner Foss Jr.)



In the following years — as the rest of the Bay Area witnessed growth and prosperity — East Palo Alto, for a number of reasons, was in a weak position to compete with its neighbors for desirable economic development. Not only was there little growth, but several key businesses shut their doors.

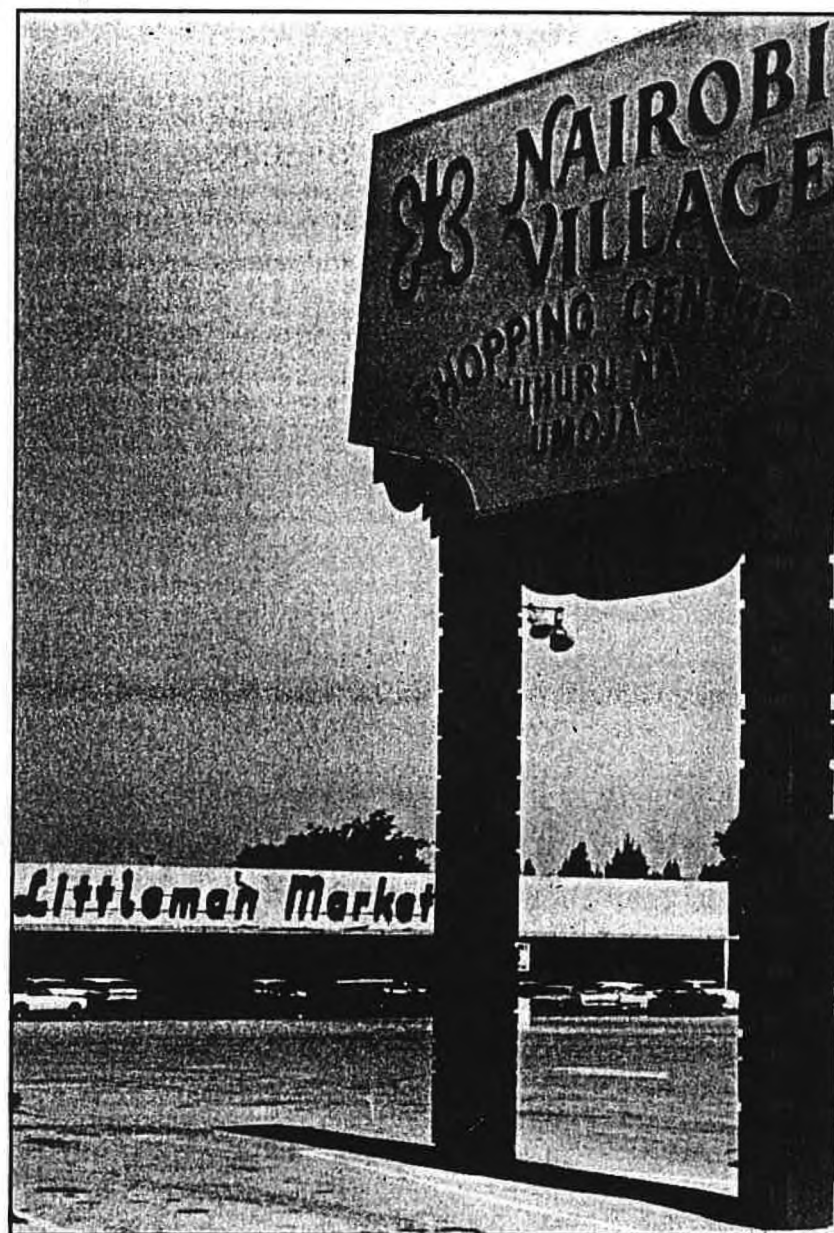
University Village Shopping Center was built at the corner of University Avenue and Bay Road in 1957. Never prosperous, it changed hands several times. It underwent renovation in the late 1960s and was renamed Nairobi Village Shopping Center. A decade later it was a boarded-up, mostly vacant eyesore notorious for loitering and illegal activities. It was finally demolished in 1989.

A Safeway grocery store operated in Whiskey Gulch from 1959 to 1974. Southern Pacific Railroad closed its East Palo Alto track in 1974 due to insufficient business. It was used rarely in subsequent years before being abandoned in 1987. All four of the city's banks left town in the 1980s.

A chamber of commerce resurfaced for a time in the 1950s. Revival was attempted in 1974, '77 and '82. It met sporadically in more recent years, and another attempt at resuscitation is currently in the works.

Today many of East Palo Alto's woes are blamed on its lack of a business tax base. The city must depend on small businesses, located primarily along University Avenue, East Bayshore and Bay Road.

The only large employer is Romic Chemical Corporation, a chemical recycling facility near Cooley's Landing. Romic originated in the early 1950s under another name and changed hands a couple of times. It was purchased out of bankruptcy in 1964 and, under the leadership of H.M. "Mike" Schneider, grew from three employees and one truck into a \$25-million company with nearly 200 employees at locations in California and Arizona.



Courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association

University Village Shopping Center was remodeled and renamed in the late 1960s.

East Palo Alto < 1950s to 1970s >

Tract housing flourished after World War II. Veterans flocked to the area because homes cost less than \$10,000 — the limit for GI Bill loans. European refugees also arrived. The late 1940s saw a boom in construction and growth. East Palo Alto's population swelled to 7,000 by 1950 and more than doubled within the next decade.

Block-busting

With the 1950s came a phenomenon that has shaped the course of East Palo Alto ever since — a practice commonly referred to as "block-busting."

At that time, discrimination and restrictions barred minorities from buying homes in many areas. Area committees, aiming to break segregation barriers, frequently helped African American families purchase homes by using a white "front" person. East Palo Alto was a focus area because prices were lower and residents were more tolerant than in other cities.

But not everyone involved in desegregation had unselfish motives. A 1963 article in the *Menlo Park Recorder* describes block-busting as an aggressive, targeted real estate promotion which typically began after a black family moved into a white neighborhood. Real estate agents — either initiating the original sale or merely taking advantage of it — went door to door and convinced residents their property would be devalued by thousands of dollars if they didn't sell immediately. Agents responsible for relocating African Americans displaced by redevelopment in San Francisco offered free bus rides to East Palo Alto. The maneuver had the dual purpose of attracting new buyers and alarming potential sellers.

Agents often arranged for a Caucasian "proxy" to buy homes cheaply from panicky sellers, then quickly resold the houses to African Americans at a much higher price. The threatened drop in prices never occurred.

Belle Haven was one of the early targets of block-busting. A special census taken in 1956 showed more than 500 "non-white" families in the area — about 50 percent of the population. The tactic continued, section by section, into the more established areas of the community for about 10 years.

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s East Palo Alto's population remained relatively stable at 18,000. But the percentage of African Americans grew from 25 percent in 1960 to 60 percent in the '70s and '80s, according to census data. Even more significant, in 1969 the area east of Bayshore was 74 percent African American, while the west side was 91 percent white. The almost-exclusively white community of the early '50s dropped to a third of the population in 1969, then decreased to its present level of 12 percent.

Annexation

(Editor's note: East Palo Alto had no official boundaries until it incorporated in 1983. There is sharp disagreement over what "belonged" to East Palo Alto prior to that time. We are using boundaries described in Werner Foss Jr.'s History of Ravenswood, written in 1942 when all the areas in question were part of unincorporated San Mateo County.)

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, neighboring cities expanded their boundaries through annexation. Heavy incursions were made into what traditionally had been considered East Palo Alto territory. There was little the town could do to prevent it — the areas were governed by San Mateo County, East Palo Alto was not incorporated and therefore unable to annex them itself, and annexation proceedings were typically initiated by the land owners.

Menlo Park annexed several areas: Belle Haven, Newbridge Park, Menalto Park, North Palo Alto, and part of Runnymede, as well as Cooley's Landing, vast tracts of bay-front open space and two industrial parks.

During the same period, San Francisquito Creek was diverted — officially for flood control reasons, although many contend

it was done to facilitate annexation. The land between the old and new creek beds (see map) was part of San Mateo County and unincorporated East Palo Alto, but was owned by the City of Palo Alto. In 1963 the state changed the county border to follow the new creek route. The area — where a golf course, airport and nature preserve are located — became part of Palo Alto and Santa Clara County.

There were also failed attempts in 1966, '78 and '81 to annex all or portions of East Palo Alto into Menlo Park and Palo Alto.

By the time East Palo Alto incorporated in 1983, the only land left was predominantly residential. A limited business tax base crippled the city's ability to become self-sufficient.

Education

East Palo Alto children were part of the Redwood City School District until the Ravenswood School District was formed in 1892. With the rapid growth of Week's Poultry Colony, local students quickly outgrew the one-room school they attended in present-day Menlo Park. In 1918 Weeks donated four acres for a new school — the site on Euclid Avenue where the district's administrative offices are today.

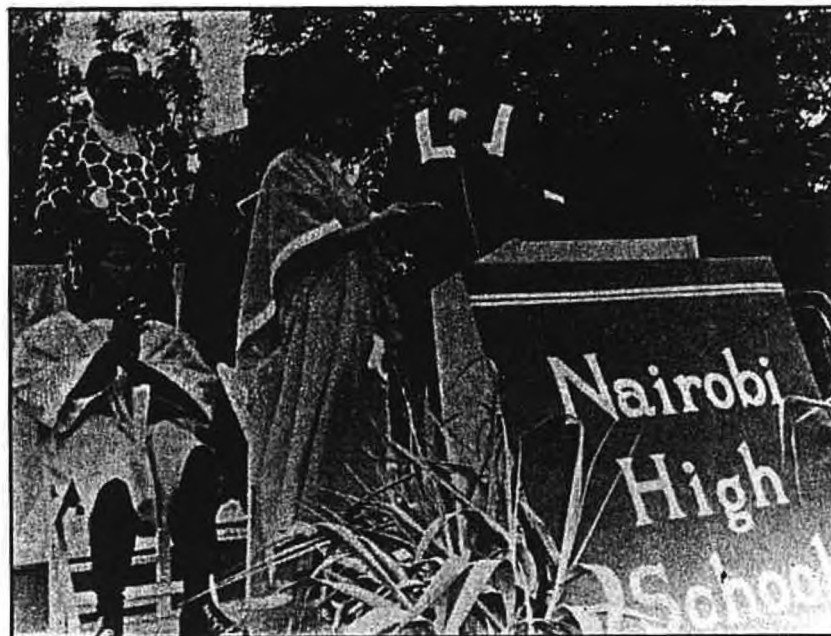
The school, which was expanded in the 1920s and '30s, also served as a center for meetings, fairs and social and cultural events. The older section was declared structurally unsafe in 1935, and the children were transferred to other schools. Newer portions continued to be used for administration and later served as a temporary home for the Senior Center. It was partially demolished in the mid-1950s, but some sections still stand.

Nearly 650 students attended Ravenswood High School when it opened in 1958 (see map). Originally its pupils were predominantly white, but by 1969 87 percent of the student body was African American. Voluntary busing two years later brought an almost equal racial balance to the school, which closed in 1975.

In 1966 Gertrude Wilks launched an "alternative approach" designed to improve upon educational opportunities for East Palo Alto children. Some 75 students participated in the so-called "sneakout," staying with families in Palo Alto and Los Altos four days a week in order to attend local schools. This prompted other families to accomplish the same ends by using false addresses to enroll their children. Illegal at the time, inter-district transfers later became a legitimate option.

Other African-Americans dissatisfied with mainstream education turned to alternative schools that focused on black pride, identity and achievement. The first was the EPA Day School, founded in 1966 by Wilks and Mothers for Equal Education: It began teaching Saturday classes in a local church. Enrollment jumped to 300 its second year, and classes expanded to Wednesday evenings.

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the school evolved into Nairobi High School and Nairobi Elemen-



Courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association

tary School. It taught 500 students five days a week in two buildings on Runnymede Street. The schools endured until the 1980s, despite threats, bomb scares and the fact that both buildings fell victim to suspected arson and Wilks' own home was torched.

Nairobi College was established by Bob Hoover in 1969 "to meet the needs of people of color." The two-year private school began with 120 students, and grew to 200 by 1971. In 1970 it opened a second campus in Redwood City. Called Venceremos (We Shall Overcome), it was intended to serve primarily Hispanic students. It had a student body of 200 when it split from Nairobi a year later, then closed in 1974. Nairobi College ceased teaching in 1981.

A latter-day Afro-centric school, Shule Mandela Academy, opened in 1981 and still operates today.

Religion

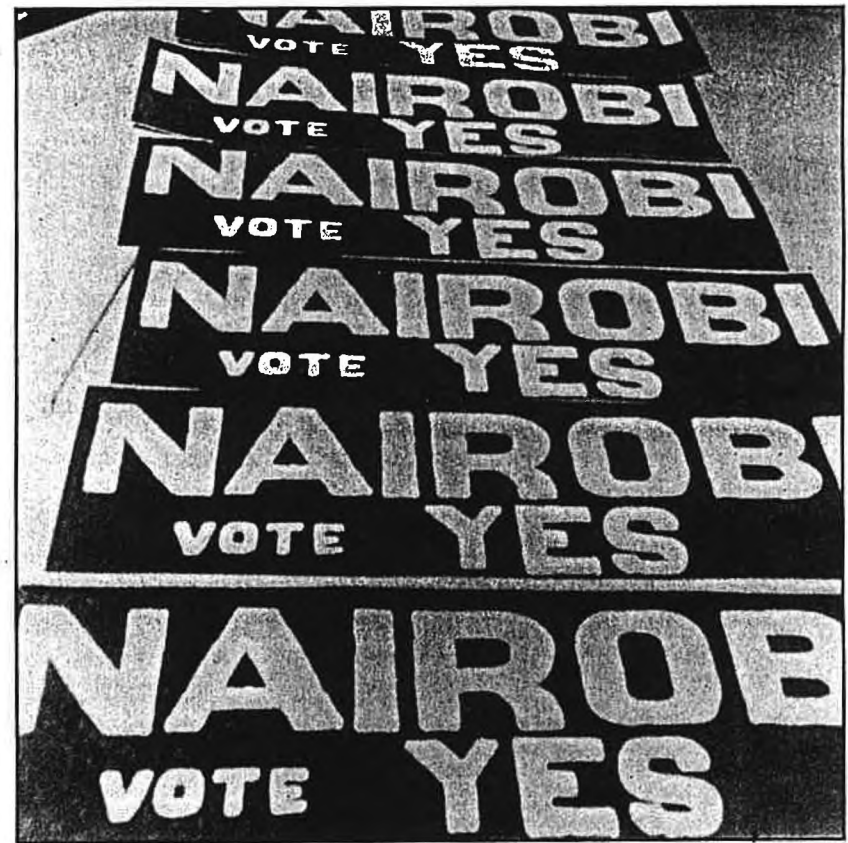
Throughout history churches have played a pivotal role in community development, and East Palo Alto is no exception. St. John Baptist Church was established in 1955 by the Rev. James and Onedia Branch. St. John's and the more-established Catholic and Community churches were important places to worship, socialize, exchange information and develop a sense of community. There are thought to be some 50 churches of numerous faiths performing the same functions in East Palo Alto today.

Municipal Government < 1966 to 1980s >

As an unincorporated area, East Palo Alto was governed by the county. Residents complained they had no say in decisions that affected them, so in 1966 county supervisors established the East Palo Alto Municipal Council. Although it was an advisory body, the county nearly always followed its recommendations. The council was made up of one representative from each of five districts, but members were elected by all voters.

"To our knowledge, this is the first program of this nature in the United States," San Mateo Legal Aid official Bruce Bailey was quoted in *The Review of the News* in 1968. "East Palo Alto is an ideal community for this experiment in incorporation and self-government of a minority area."

The Council began meeting in a storefront in the University Village Shopping Center, found new chambers on Pulgas Avenue in 1971, then moved into the county government center in 1975 (see map). Among those to serve was Willia Gray, later honored as the nation's first black woman mayor.



Courtesy of Palo Alto Historical Association

Bumper stickers promote renaming East Palo Alto in 1968.

In 1968 there was an election to rename East Palo Alto. Several alternatives were considered, including Uhuru and Kenyatta, before Nairobi was settled upon. The measure was defeated more than 2 to 1. At the time, the greatest support for the name change came from the 18-to-21 age group. It was believed that if the voting age had been 18 at that time, the outcome of the election would have been different.

One of the frustrations of unincorporation was the number of special districts to which residents paid taxes for such services as drainage, fire protection, garbage, sanitation, lighting, recreation, water, education, etc. According to one source, East Palo Alto fell under the jurisdiction of 37 special districts in the mid-1960s. Consolidation of these districts and their services was one of the arguments used to support incorporation.

Incorporation < 1981 to 1987 >

East Palo Alto's battle to achieve cityhood was a long and tumultuous one. Incorporation was proposed as early as 1931 and again four years later. The idea was revived in 1951. A study was done by the Ravenswood-Willow Boosters, which voted 38-29 against incorporation amid charges the meeting was packed with anti-city members.

In the fall of 1953 civic leaders formed a committee to study incorporation. The effort died in early 1954, following a near riot of 400 people at a meeting at Brentwood School. In the summer of 1958 residents living west of Bayshore attempted to incorporate themselves into a city to be called Woodland Oaks. At the same time an effort was made to incorporate the east side into Menlo Park. Both attempts failed. In 1981 the area west of Bayshore again applied for annexation to Menlo Park and was denied.

Residents, both pro and con, were deeply divided on the issue. But supporters of incorporation persisted, arguing that incorporation offered the promise of:

- Direct control over planning, zoning and land use;
- Direct control over how and where funds were spent;
- Better leverage and organization in obtaining funds;
- Improved level of services to residents;
- Consolidation of services being provided by numerous special districts;
- Elected officials who would be more accountable to local residents; and
- Improved community focus, identity and power.

A consultant's draft report, prepared for the county in 1980, stated incorporation was not economically feasible and endorsed annexation to Menlo Park. Its findings were contested by the municipal government.

The final report said incorporation, under certain conditions, would best fulfill the town's economic and community development needs. "Incorporation will focus the authority, the responsibility, and the tools that are currently available to accomplish community development in a single, politically visible entity — the new City Council."

Pro-city supporters filed papers in the spring of 1981, seeking to put the issue on the November ballot. This final, successful effort to incorporate would not be resolved for six years.

The county delayed an election until studies could be completed. In 1982 supervisors rejected, and then agreed to, an April election. A coalition against incorporation filed a legal challenge which was dismissed.

In order for incorporation to succeed, four related measures on the ballot had to be approved. One, a proposal to dissolve the East Palo Alto Sanitary District, lost by 41 votes. It was defeated by sanitary district voters who lived in Menlo Park and would not have been affected by incorporation.

A new petition for incorporation was filed. This time a single measure was put on the June 1983 ballot, and dissolution of the sanitary district was not a condition. Another lawsuit failed to stop the election.

Incorporation was approved by 15 votes: 1,782 to 1,767. East Palo Alto officially became a city on July 1, 1983.

Another legal challenge ensued, this one claiming that up to 300 absentee ballots, which tipped the balance of the election, were cast illegally. The county Superior Court invalidated only eight votes — five for and three against incorporation. The measure still won by 13 votes.

An appeal was filed, and in the fall of 1984 the courts tossed out some 100 absentee ballots. They were unanimously reinstated after another appeal brought the case before the state Supreme Court. The decision was appealed again, this time to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1987 it declined to review the case, ending all further legal challenges.

Political forces on both sides of the issue remained deeply divided, and talk of disincorporation has resurfaced as recently as this year.

East Palo Alto Today

Demographics

Today East Palo Alto is recognized as an ethnically diverse community. While the percentage of African Americans has declined in recent years, the number of Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, Asians and other races has increased. Nearly a third of the city's 23,500 residents were born outside the United States.

The Hispanic community in particular has grown from 5 percent of the population in 1978 to 14 percent in 1980 and 34 percent 10 years later. The increase is even more marked in the

school district: 8 percent in 1979, 26 percent in 1983, and 63 percent today. Spanish is spoken by nearly a third of residents.

The remainder of the population is 41.5 percent African American, 12 percent non-Hispanic white, and 9 percent Asian and Pacific Islander.

East Palo Alto is considered to be fairly transient. According to the latest census, nearly 60 percent of its 7,000 homes are rented, and less than half the residents lived in the same house from 1985 to 1990. Average income is \$33,700 per household, but 17 percent of residents live below poverty level. An average household has 3.3 persons.

The education level is lower than average for the Bay Area. Less than 15 percent of the city's adult population has earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Roughly equal numbers (20 percent) have an elementary school education, did not complete high school, graduated from high school, or received some college education.

Redevelopment

In 1969 San Mateo County's Redevelopment Commission formed the forerunner to East Palo Alto's Redevelopment Agency. Since that time, however, there's been little physical development, despite the fact that land is considerably less expensive in East Palo Alto than in neighboring cities. It is increasingly apparent that development — and the accompanying tax base — is critical to the city's survival.

Redevelopment areas include the:

- a) Ravenswood Industrial Park, which basically runs along Bay Road from Pulgas to Cooley's Landing;
- b) Four Corners, which is usually included with the Ravenswood area, at the intersection of University Avenue and Bay Road;
- c) University Circle, also known as Whiskey Gulch (see map); and

d) Gateway 101, which runs along the east Bayshore frontage road and includes the former Ravenswood High School.

Developments have been proposed for each area but have not materialized. Initially the town's unincorporated status was blamed.

In 1976 there were plans for an elaborate 450-berth marina next to Cooley's Landing, and the strip was de-annexed from Menlo Park. Setbacks with the economy and the developer killed the project in the 1980s. There was talk of building a stadium for the San Francisco Giants in the Ravenswood Industrial Area in 1988.

Two major redevelopment efforts were DeMonet Industries' attempt from 1988-93 to build twin office towers at University Circle and Sun Microsystems' 1989-91 bid to develop the Ravenswood Industrial Park. After multi-million dollar investments, both proposed projects failed for essentially the same reasons: an economic downturn, divided political support, legal challenges, and organized opposition from businesses and residents who would have been displaced.

In 1988 the Gateway 101 area was targeted to become a proposed auto mall. Today the city has an agreement with Home Depot to anchor a proposed 90-acre retail development there.

Crime and drugs

East Palo Alto has been characterized as having an excessive crime rate since the 1950s. In the 1960s, according to a report by Phyllis Barusch and Harriet Nathan, "burglaries were so common that business insurance was being canceled and exorbitantly high premiums were demanded, while new businesses were discouraged from entering the area."

Residents have complained of inadequate police protection since Whiskey Gulch earned an unsavory reputation in the 1930s. The concerns were combined with later charges that the sheriff's department unfairly harassed minorities. In 1969 the

county approved an East Palo Alto substation. It was headed by Lieutenant Leonard Cordoza, who later became sheriff. He served at the pleasure of the Municipal Council and reported to both it and the county. Each of the 12 deputies could be replaced if he was not acceptable to the council or the community.

But the town's alarm over an active drug trade and accompanying crime continued to grow. By 1979 East Palo Alto's crime rate was four times that of San Mateo County. The problem escalated, and in 1992 East Palo Alto suffered the highest murder rate (based on population) of any city in the nation. While some questioned the validity of the claim, all agreed the situation was intolerable.

Looking Ahead

What has been referred to as "that obscene statistic" may have done more than anything else to galvanize the community and its supporters into action. Today an unprecedented amount of assistance is pouring into East Palo Alto from all sectors: individuals, businesses, non-profit organizations and foundations, and local, state and federal governments. It has met with initial success, indicated by a significant drop in crime.

With this increase in resources, commitment and focus on economic development, East Palo Alto may be closer than ever to realizing its potential. As the city celebrates 10 years of incorporation and nearly 145 years of existence, there is hope in 1993 that East Palo Alto finally will be able to strike a harmonious balance between Isaiah Woods' goal of commercial development and Charles Weeks' dream of an idyllic community.

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