

Hopes thwarted by image

East Palo Altans struggling to unify, improve community

By Scott Herhold
Staff Writer

EAST PALO ALTO — A few blocks from the Bayshore Freeway, on a route that leads thousands of commuters to and from the Dumbarton Bridge, is a yellow, tawdry bar that has become a legend: "Mickey's Blue Room."

Until it was closed recently, Mickey's was known among law enforcement officials as a center for gamblers, fences, and narcotics peddlers. Sheriff's deputies frequently found blood inside from transactions that went awry.

"Mickey's was a place that

people traditionally met to organize their activities," said Sheriff's Capt. Gerald Fitting. "You walked into the Blue Room to make a contract. From there you went outside."

But last year, largely because of community pressure, Mickey's began to feel the heat. A special police patrol was stationed outside the bar. Its owner, Mickey Manuel, was convicted of raping a teen-age girl. Finally, the Blue Room closed its doors.

The East Palo Alto Municipal Council, the Newbridge community, and the sheriff's office all claimed credit for helping to rid the neighborhood

of a nuisance. But a closer look shows their enthusiasm may have been premature.

Privately, authorities say the crowd from Mickey's has moved its act elsewhere in East Palo Alto — to the Nairobi Shopping Center, to the private gambling clubs, or to the convenience liquor stores that dot the landscape.

"It's hard to say that we've really solved the problem," said one officer. "But it's gotten to the place where it's a little more manageable. We know where we can find these characters now."

Luridness aside, the story of
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Mickey's illustrates a twin truth about East Palo Alto: The community is anxious to improve itself, but the problems are so deeply entrenched that a magical transformation is impossible.

Crime is only the most visible of East Bayshore's problems. As the only black community between San Francisco and San Jose, East Palo Alto has long suffered in contrast to its more affluent neighbors.

In fact, community leaders often contend that the very presence of those affluent neighbors makes life harder for them, particularly in the crucial game of federal grantsmanship. Sandwiched between the Bayshore Freeway and the San Francisco Bay, the East Bayshore community is actually made up of two communities: East Palo Alto, an unincorporated section of San Mateo County, and Belle Haven, a part of Menlo Park.

The landscape is more like a rural village than an urban ghetto. The homes are small and sometimes seem the victims of bizarre zoning. Vegetable patches grow in vacant fields. A few old cars sit in front yards, waiting for revival.

East Palo Alto's main artery, University Avenue, is a handsome four-lane thoroughfare that stretches north to a new Bank of America and municipal building. But some of the side roads amble lazily toward the Bay, their chuckholes a menace to motorists.

Just across the freeway is a remnant from the days when Palo Alto was a "dry" town — the so-called "Whiskey Gulch," where a few liquor stores still do a thriving business on the edge of Palo Alto. The freeway is an ever-present division from the affluence to the west.

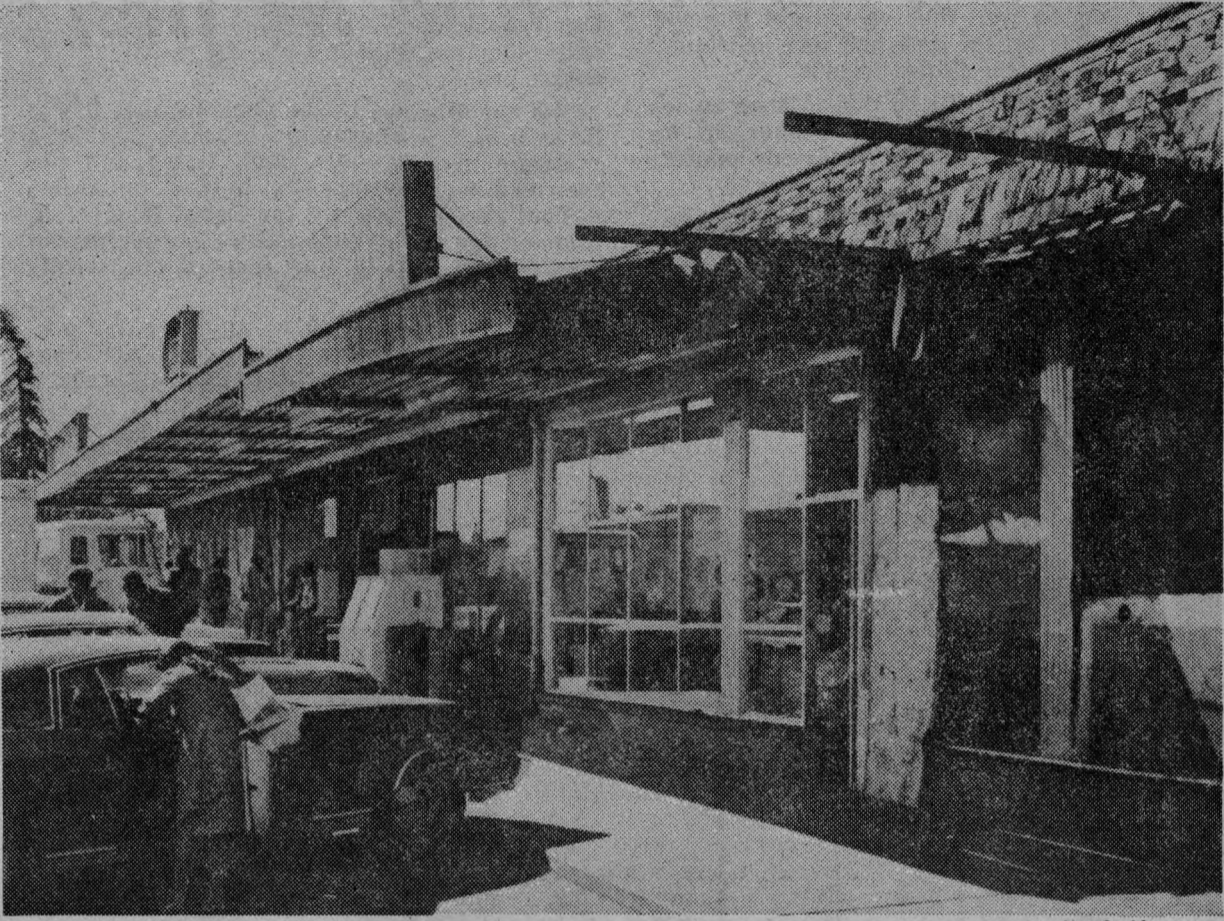
Together, East Palo Alto and Belle Haven have a population of about 25,000, with an estimated 20 percent of it black. Although it is a tiny community compared to the ghettos of San Francisco or Oakland, its problems are the same: unemployment, substandard housing, and lack of industry.

To understand those problems, it's necessary to know something of the history of East Palo Alto and the strange accident of modern transportation that encouraged a black enclave within a stone's throw of Leland Stanford's vast farm.

Founded in 1916 by Charles Weeks — an eccentric poultry farmer who once released two hens by parachute to reward Palo Altans at Thanksgiving — the so-called Runnymede community in East Palo Alto was based on the slogan, "One Acre and Independence."

For years, the area was a primarily white adjunct to Palo Alto, run by citizens anxious to preserve their individuality and low taxes. Weeks himself became famous for his

alo Alto: tale of two communities



Nairobi Shopping Center, struck by fire and vandalism, is economic failure



Mickey's Blue Room had a notorious reputation

open houses and lectures on chicken farming.

But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as jobs began to open for blacks in the East Bay and Midpeninsula, the pattern changed. Real estate agents promoted "block-busting," the practice of warning whites that home values would go down as blacks arrived.

With the completion of the Bayshore Freeway in 1958, the geographical division of the races was concretized and East Palo Alto was effectively shut off from its neighbors.

As the ethnic composition of

East Palo Alto changed, so did its needs. Part of the community's problems was a heritage of white neglect. As an unincorporated area, East Palo Alto had poorer roads, inadequate recreational facilities, unrepaired sewers, and a tense relationship between police and the community.

In the late '60s when the drive for self-determination first surfaced in the black community, a new wave of black leaders began petitioning the County Board of Supervisors for its own voice in government.

A parallel development was occurring in the schools, where blacks were disturbed about the education of their children. A group known as Mothers for Equal Education was formed in 1965 and eventually opened the Nairobi Day Schools, an alternative to the Ravenswood School District.

In 1967, San Mateo County authorities agreed to the formation of the East Palo Alto Municipal Council, which became the advisory body for the community. But although East Palo Alto began to receive large federal grants, the problems of control and political leadership continued.

"Simply put, the major problem is that the East of Bayshore is incoherent," said a consultant's report prepared in 1973. "That is, it does not function like a community and the residents do not have a sure and certain identification with

an overall concept of community."

The clearest split — and one that persists now — was between East Palo Alto and Belle Haven. The consultant's report noted that the Belle Haven residents, who already enjoyed substantial city services from Menlo Park, were wary of incorporating with East Palo Alto.

Just as serious have been the splits between the various power groups in East Palo Alto — the Municipal Council, the Ravenswood School District, and the Ravenswood Recreation & Parks District. That, too, has persisted — although East Palo Alto leaders say now there are new signs of unity.

Bereft of any real local power but agonizingly close to the streets, the Municipal Council has had to grapple with stubborn problems: Unemployment is estimated at 30 percent, crime remains high, and most residents still shop outside the area for their basic needs.

Two facts underline the paradox of a ghetto community in the midst of the affluent Peninsula: East Palo Alto residents pay about \$14-per-\$100 assessed valuation in property — the highest tax rate in the county, but many homes are empty and only recently has the high vacancy rate begun to abate.

The most consistent problem

has been economic. Although East Palo Alto offers about the last good available land on the Peninsula, industry and commerce have been reluctant to locate there, frightened, as one realtor put it, of the "boogeyman of the black community."

Whenever businessmen talk of economic revival, the specter of crime is immediately raised. In fact, East Palo Alto does have a higher crime rate than some of its more affluent neighbors — although community leaders say that problem has been exaggerated by the white press.

"In San Mateo County," said Councilman Henry Anthony, "the reporters dig out East Palo Alto crime. If a guy beats his wife here, it makes headlines. In Atherton, you don't hear about it."

Even the statistics are a matter of some dispute. A study published last August by the Ravenswood Recreation & Park District showed that East Palo Alto, with some 19,000 residents, reported 2,124 major crimes in 1976, half of which were burglaries.

During the first six months of 1977, however, the study showed that burglaries had decreased by 19 percent, grand theft was down 12.5 percent, and auto theft decreased 15 percent. The sheriff's office has attributed part of the decrease

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East Palo Alto attacks problems

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to a neighborhood crime prevention program.

Although the Municipal Council disagreed strongly with some of the study's methods and conclusions, it, too, has claimed a role in the fight against crime. The council members list a series of cases in which the residents helped clean up their areas.

"One thing I feel very good about is that people are speaking out about things," said Mayor Gertrude Wilks, who was the founder of Mothers for Equal Education. "People spoke out about crime. People said we've had enough."

Crime is not the only area in which the Municipal Council leaders see some improvement. They point to the formation of a new land development corporation to attract industry and to a new study beginning on the possibilities of incorporation.

Already, some major projects are on the drawing boards. With the building of the new Dumbarton Bridge, Kenneth Goode, the chief executive officer, hopes to train some 400 unskilled residents in construction trades. In a recent interview, he and Councilman Anthony explained that they have plans for a new marina and industrial park.

As Anthony sees it, the key to the problem is access — a problem that could be eased if Palo Alto permits the construction of a southern access road to the new bridge. With industry and a marina, he contends incorporation — and thus self-control — would be far more manageable.

Others on the council say in-

corporation is necessary now to allow East Palo Alto to compete for the same benefits other cities enjoy. While conceding that the tax base is slim, they say there is enough money to pay for contract services like police, fire, or garbage pickup.

Incorporation appeared to pick up a powerful backer last August when Congressman Pete McCloskey proposed moving city or county boundaries to allow East Bayshore to have its own government.

"Either East of Bayshore should be able to incorporate on its own or the city governments (Palo Alto and Menlo Park) who cut it off when Bayshore was constructed should reach across the freeway to help the community," McCloskey said.

The movement toward self-government has been evident in yet another important arena: education. It is here that it has come directly into conflict with an equally potent move toward integration.

For years, East Palo Alto's schools have been considered inferior to those on the west side of Bayshore — a feeling that was underscored when 200 East Palo Alto youngsters attended Palo Alto's schools during the "affidavit" program of the late '60s and early '70s.

In 1976, a group of parents with children in the largely black Ravenswood School District filed suit against 10 local school districts, seeking a desegregation plan across district and even county lines.

The plaintiffs, who were supported by the Midpeninsula Task Force on Integrated Edu-

cation, charged that the failure of the districts to eliminate segregated schools deprived the Ravenswood children of "equal opportunities for education" and "due process of law."

The so-called Tinsley suit, which could have repercussions for large districts like Los Angeles, is now pending in appeals court. The plaintiffs' attorneys say they intend to take the case to the California Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, however, some leaders in the Ravenswood district, including a majority on the Municipal Council, have opposed such a historic move. Their protest has centered on the possibility that they would lose control of their schools and potentially the jobs of their teachers.

Their suspicions were intensified by the closing two years ago of Ravenswood High School, a school that many saw as one of the few symbols left to the black community. An effort to achieve a racial balance by making Ravenswood a "magnet" for white children across the freeway had failed.

Another development has been the announcement that the recreation district, the school board and the Municipal Council are interested in buying Ravenswood High School, possibly as a demonstration school.

The community leaders say that such cooperation betokens a new era of unity and community development. "It's an exciting community," said the vice chairman of the Municipal Council, Omowale. "You wake up every day with a new agenda."