

Jim Crow Cities in California

By J. M. Beach

1. Jim Crow San Francisco and the East Bay

The San Francisco Bay area was highly segregated by race. A black resident of San Francisco complained in 1927 that “residential segregation is as real in California as in Mississippi. A mob is unnecessary. All that’s needed is a neighbor[hood] meeting and agreement in writing not to rent, lease, or sell to blacks, and the Courts will do the rest.”¹ The East Bay area in particular had a large percentage of native-born, middle-class whites up until the 1940s and this community blended a white supremacist Americanism with a Protestant based progressive reformisms that reacted harshly to both the non-white populations of California, but also the corrupt machine politics of San Francisco. During the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan of the East Bay attracted several thousand members in their political and moral quest to “promote the welfare of the Caucasian race and to teach the doctrine of white supremacy,” to “promote and maintain the purity of white blood,” and the to preserve the “one language; and one flag; AMERICANIZATION OF ALL!”² This white supremacism marked the Bay Area well into the 1960s. In 1952 a black family had moved to an all-white neighborhood in San Francisco and they were welcomed by a one hundred fifty member crowd throwing rocks. Later they were subjected to multiple harassments including a cross-burning on their lawn and in 1964 five shots

¹ Quoted in Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*, 137.

² Quoted in Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 59, 61.

from a rifle were fired into the house.³ In the 1950s private cemeteries in Oakland refused to burry African American bodies.⁴ Many local bars in the San Francisco area would not serve non-white minorities, and a state statute was passed in 1960 threatening revocation of operating licenses if bars continued this discrimination.⁵ There were also numerous reported instances of discrimination in the local labor market.⁶

The Chinese had always been discriminated against in San Francisco and for over a century the majority of the city's Chinese population would be confined to a Ghetto in the north-east corner of the city. As late as 1975 more than half the city of San Francisco's Chinese population was still crowed into the ghetto of Chinatown, which was the second most densely populated are of the U.S. For many of the approximately 4,000 Chinese immigrants arriving each year in the 1970s there was little work and few opportunities for a better life.⁷

The African American population in San Francisco grew during World War II because of increased economic opportunities in the military and the East Bay shipping industries, but as more African Americans arrived in the Bay area segregation became more rigidly enforced, and blacks were largely confined to ghettos in the industrial areas of Oakland. From 1940 to 1950 about 100,000 African Americans would migrate to the Bay area and the black population of Oakland would increase from 3 percent of the total population to 12 percent by 1950. In the 1960s Oakland was 34 percent African American, but West Oakland was 85 percent black and North Oakland was 60 percent black. Competition with white workers was intense, unions excluded non-whites, and blacks were the “‘last hired, first fired’ segment of the industrial

³ Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954 – 1965* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 206.

⁴ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 21.

⁵ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 119.

⁶ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 32, 68, 208, 219.

⁷ Kevin Starr, *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135-38; William Albert Allard, “Chinatown, the Gilded Ghetto,” *The National Geographic*, 148, no. 5(Nov 1975): 626-643.

working class.” In many black Californian ghettos the unemployment rate was over double the national average. In 1966 West Oakland had a reported black unemployment rates at around 20 percent with the 14-19 age black population suffering from 41 percent unemployment. As the industrial base of the East Bay area steadily shrunk in the 1950s, African Americans became a ghettoized urban population left with mostly unskilled and low-wage employment opportunities when there were any jobs to be found.⁸

Richmond turned into another black ghetto during the 1940s. Early in the decade there were less than 300 blacks in the city, but by 1950 there were over 13,300 making up 13.4 percent of the cities population. In the 1960s African Americans made up 12 percent of the population in Western Contra Costa County, just north of Berkeley, and they were highly segregated in and around the Richmond area, with North Richmond being over 90 percent black. Compared to the wealthier, white Kensington Highlands area, North Richmond’s median family income was less than half, and the value of housing was about one third, with over 21 percent of the houses in a dilapidated condition. Almost 88 percent of the male North Richmond’s male work force was blue-collar, and the male unemployment rate was almost 28 percent. The unemployment rate for white Kensington Highlands was 1.4 percent.⁹

A study was conducted through the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1965 on the segregated schooling in Western Contra Costa County. This study looked at 17,000 students in 11 public junior and senior high schools in the area. The study found that most African Americans in the area attended *de facto* segregated elementary schools, mixed-race junior high schools, and majority white senior high schools. The segregated schools filled with

⁸ Daniel Crowe, *Prophets of Rage: The Black Freedom Struggle in San Francisco, 1945-1969* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 2, 17, 24-25, 56, 62, 152; Daryl E. Lembke, “Oakland Still an Ailing Community,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Jan. 1966, 1; Rhomberg, *No There There*, 82, 97, 121; Starr, *California*, 228, 234.

⁹ Crowe, *Prophets of Rage*, 29; Alan B. Wilson, *The Consequences of Segregation: Academic Achievement in a Northern Community* (Berkeley, CA: Glendessary Press, 1969), 2-3, 5.

economically underprivileged students clearly gave African Americans an unequal education as the average black student was 1.7 years behind white students by grade six. Those black students that were able to attend predominantly white elementary schools scored much better than students attending segregated schools, and when social-class was factored out of the equation than the achievement of white and black students was almost identical. African American students in segregated schools were also almost twice as likely to have police records as white students in integrated schools. The report concluded: “The unequal inheritance with which students enter school, which should become less salient as students progress through school if schools in fact ‘maximized individual potential,’ is in fact aggravated because of segregation.” African American children attending segregated elementary schools in economically depressed areas were placed at a great disadvantage when it came to academic achievement in junior and senior high school and, through less connection and encouragement from the school system in the teenage years, they were more prone to drop out of school and engage in criminal activities.¹⁰

2. *Jim Crow Fresno*

Fresno, California was established in the 1870s. Two thirds of the early community were white farmers and one third were Chinese laborers who had worked on the Central Pacific Railroad. The quickly decided in 1873 not to rent, sell, or lease any property to the Chinese within the city limits and so this minority population was segregated “across the tracks” in West Fresno. During the early twentieth century Mexican Americans and African Americans began to move to the area to work as agricultural workers or in the local food processing industries.

¹⁰ Wilson, *The Consequences of Segregation*, 10, 25, 32-33, 37, 58, 65. See also: Crowe, *Prophets of Rage*, 72-79.

These new minority populations were also forced to reside in West Fresno. Fresno was one of the most segregated cities in California in 1960, and up until the 1970s more than 90 percent of the Mexican Americans and African Americans in Fresno were concentrated on the segregated west side of town where they were subjected to dilapidated housing, substandard schooling, lack of jobs and local businesses, and high rates of unemployment and poverty. Over 39 percent of West Fresno residents lived below the poverty level. One Fresno resident and former state congressman called the dividing line of Highway 99 and the railroad tracks “Fresno’s Berlin Wall” because it so perfectly marked off the barrier between prosperous white east Fresno and the West Fresno ghetto.¹¹

In 1970 Fresno’s segregated west side adult population had completed only a median of 8.9 years of schooling. 41 percent of this population had not completed the eighth grade and 34 percent had not completed high school. The schools in West Fresno were “extremely segregated,” and many schools had minority populations over 97 percent. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare officials began an investigation of Fresno in 1969 and concluded in 1973 that this city had not complied with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. After some half-hearted attempts at desegregation, West Fresno was still highly segregated in the early 1980s with many schools still hovering above 94 percent minority enrollments.¹²

3. Jim Crow Riverside

Riverside was a small farming community east of Los Angeles near the Southern Pacific railroad route and it remained a fairly small and homogeneous agricultural community up until

¹¹ Ramon D. Chacon, “A Case Study of Ghettoization and Segregation: West Fresno’s Black and Chicano Community During the 1970s,” Stanford Center for Chicano Research, Working Paper Series No. 12 (Jan 1986): 2, 5, 7, Table 4.

¹² Chacon, “A Case Study of Ghettoization and Segregation,” 10-11, 15-16, 18, Table 1.

the 1950s. An early historian wrote of Riverside in 1912, “No saloons, no slums, and plenty of genuine Christianity.” This is not to say there were no non-white minorities living in the city; in fact Chinese and Mexican Americans had lived in and near Riverside from the start, but these minorities remained very small until the 1950s. In 1955 a *Riverside Press* editorial pronounced the city a “clean, solid, progressive community,” of course this progressive community had been kept orderly and homogeneous with the help of the Ku Klux Klan and rigid social segregation in public facilities, schools, housing, and the labor market.¹³

The school board had gerrymandered school zones up through the 1920s in order to keep white neighborhood schools segregated, and where Mexican American students did attend predominantly white schools, there was segregation of non-white populations in separate, special classes. The population of the city in 1960 was about 86 percent white, 8.5 percent Mexican American, and 4.7 percent black. Riverside was ranked by a UCLA research team in 1966 as the third most segregated city in California. In a survey of the Riverside community in 1968, University of California at Riverside professor Irving G. Hendrick pointed out that “Negroes and Mexican-Americans in Riverside occupied the lowest employment positions, had the lowest median incomes, and were lowest in the socio-economic index.” It wasn’t until 1965 that parents of non-white minority children petitioned the school district to desegregate Riverside schools. But Riverside officials responded very quickly to these demands. It took only seven weeks before the city became the first school system in the U.S. with a student population greater than 100,000 to create and implement an integration and racial balance plan, which it started in 1965. But three years after this plan had been initiated, not much concrete progress had been made in the schools for minority children. The larger issues of segregation were also ignored:

¹³ ¹³ Irving G. Hendrick, *The Development of a School Integration Plan in Riverside, California: A History and Perspective*, University of California, Riverside State McAteer Project M7-14 (Riverside, CA: Riverside Unified School District, 1968), 21-33, 42-47; Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 144-47.

labor market discrimination, unemployment, residential segregation, and discrimination in the sale and renting of housing. Even if non-white students managed to get an education in Riverside the possibilities of decent employment and non-segregated housing were slim.¹⁴

4. *Jim Crow Los Angeles*

Up through the 1940s Los Angeles was about 90 percent white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the Midwest. The popular media advertised Los Angeles as America writ at large: a mythologized landscape of endless “promise” and “a feeling that here all things are possible.”¹⁵ But as more white Midwesterners and Southerners with white supremacist tendencies immigrated to the city along with a growing influx of African Americans and Mexican Americans, the possibility and promise of Los Angeles was systematically kept from non-white minorities in this “Jim Crow City of Angeles.”¹⁶ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s non-white minorities were socially and economically segregated in urban ghettos with substandard housing, low-wage employment, high unemployment, and high rates of poverty.¹⁷ In 1922 one columnist in the *Santa Monica Weekly Interpreter* told the local African American population, “Negroes, we don’t want you here; now and forever, this is to be a white man’s town.”¹⁸

By 1965 around 40 percent of the 650,000 African Americans living in Los Angeles County were segregated in south central Los Angeles, mainly in Avalon, Watts, Willowbrook, Green Meadows, Exposition, and Central Los Angeles. Most of these areas were over 80 percent

¹⁴ Hendrick, *The Development of a School Integration Plan in Riverside, California*, 1, 21-33, 42-47, 82, 154, 184.

¹⁵ Robert De Roos, “Los Angeles,” *The National Geographic*, 22, no. 4 (Oct 1962): 451-501.

¹⁶ Starr, *California*, 232. See also: Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 189, 191, 198; Starr, *The Dream Endures*, 178-79.

¹⁷ Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 198-199; Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 56-60; Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 168-169; Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 90-92; Starr, *The Dream Endures*, 171-73, 176-79; Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 54-55.

¹⁸ *Santa Monica Weekly Interpreter*, April 26, 1922, cited in Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 200.

Black, and some areas like Watts and Avalon were over 90 percent Black. While the Latino population had historically been the most segregated minority population in Los Angeles, in the 1960s this population became less segregated than blacks, as only about 20 percent of the Latinos in the city lived in the East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights barrios. While the metropolitan Los Angeles area had an average unemployment rate of 5.8 percent in 1960, South Los Angeles's unemployment rate hovered around 11.3 percent with Watts all the way at 15.6 percent, and East Los Angeles was around 8.5 percent. In 1960 the Western states had a median family income of \$6,882, while the median family income for South Los Angeles was \$5,122 with Watts down at \$3,879, and East Los Angeles at \$5,513. And both communities suffered from high poverty rates, although some parts of the African American community had much higher poverty rates than those in the Mexican American barrio. In 1965 about 26.8 percent of South Los Angeles residents lived below the poverty line, compared to 23.6 percent of East Los Angeles residents, but Watts had 41.5 percent of its community living below the poverty line and both Avalon and Central had over 31.5 percent in poverty.¹⁹ Many other ethnic minorities were similarly segregated and suffered from social and economic exclusion.²⁰

In 1962 a County Commission on Human Relations official for Los Angeles declared this city to be one of the most segregated communities in the U.S.²¹ From the 1930s to the 1990s this city has seen no less than three major race riots and two ethnic-cleansing round ups of non-white

¹⁹ Division of Fair Employment Practices, *Negroes and Mexican Americans in South and East Los Angeles* (San Francisco, CA: Department of Industrial Relations, 1966), 10, 17, 20-23, 29, 32; Ian F. Haney Lopez, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), ch 3. In 1949 Mexican Americans were more segregated as about 75 percent of this minority population was mostly confined to three of Los Angeles' twenty-nine census tracts. Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 169.

²⁰ U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Generation Deprived: Los Angeles School Desegregation* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, May 1977), 2-4.

²¹ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 170; Peter B. Levy, ed., *Let Freedom Ring: A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 258.

populations.²² When two African American school teachers tried to move into a white Los Angeles neighborhood in 1957 the locals tossed rocks through their windows and burned a cross on their lawn (the police apparently did nothing to prevent the attacks).²³ African Americans were denied the right to buy a house in Dominguez Hills and Torrance in 1962 and 1963. This led to a civil rights demonstration by CORE activists and the arrests of 203 activists.²⁴ There were also numerous reported instances of discrimination in employment. Many businesses would simply not hire blacks, including taxi companies, hotels, department stores, fire departments, and *The Los Angeles Times*.²⁵

Historian Robert M. Fogelson argued that in Los Angeles “*De facto* if not *de jure* segregation pervaded the school system” up through the 1930s.²⁶ While *de jure* segregation in public schools had been largely discontinued by the late 1940s with the ruling in *Mendez v. Westminster*, a high degree of residential segregation in the Los Angeles area still left a *de facto* segregated school system administered by a white officials. This situation of segregated schooling would have included the area junior colleges which were located in segregated school districts.²⁷ One white principal of a mostly Mexican American school in the San Fernando Valley exclaimed to a social worker, “Why teach them to read and write and spell? Why worry about it?...They’ll only pick beets anyway.”²⁸

²² The major riots include: The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, the Watts Riot of 1965, and the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The major ethnic deportations include: the repatriation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s and the Japanese incarceration in prison camps during the 1940s. For the riots see: Mauricio Mazon, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1984); Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 166-68; Starr, *The Dream Endures*, 172-73; Starr, *California*, 232-34, 308-10.

²³ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 67; Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*, 267.

²⁴ Doug Mauldin, “Summer Strife in Torrance: City Beset With Woes,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 Sept. 1963, CS1.

²⁵ Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *My Soul Is A Witness*, 32, 47.

²⁶ Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 201; U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Generation Deprived*, 6-7.

²⁷ U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights: Hearings Held in Los Angeles and San Francisco* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 78-80.

²⁸ Cited in Starr, *The Dream Endures*, 172. Even college educated non-whites, like the Japanese, in Los Angeles during the 1930s and 40s were subjected to low-paid work in a highly segregated labor market. See: Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 128-33.

After being sued by the ACLU in 1963, the Los Angeles City Unified School District was declared illegally segregated by the court system in 1970 in *Crawford v. Board of Education of the City of Los Angeles*. The ruling was upheld on appeal to the California Supreme Court in 1976. Mexican American and African American students were concentrated in majority-minority schools due to a history of *de facto* residential segregation in Los Angeles County and *de jure* educational segregation due to racist assignment policies in place up until 1963. Up until the 1970s many schools in Los Angeles were either 90 percent white or 90 percent minority schools: 42 percent of all elementary schools, 35 percent of all junior high schools, and 45 percent of all high schools had minority enrollments above 80 percent. 26 percent of elementary schools, 23 percent of all junior high schools, and 29 percent of all high schools had minority enrollments above 98 percent. These majority-minority schools were not providing an equal and adequate education. Mexican Americans were almost four years behind the educational attainment of white students and Black students were almost two years behind. The achievement gap had closed somewhat by 1970, but both minority groups still trailed their white counterparts. Many majority-minority high schools suffered from drop out rates between 47 and 53 percent.²⁹

5. *Jim Crow Pasadena*

Pasadena was a predominantly white suburb of Los Angeles and it had high degrees of racial segregation due to the ghettoization of non-white minorities and the school district policies designed to keep most schools highly segregated. By the mid 1960s Pasadena was 68.9 percent white, 21.1 percent African American, and 9.9 percent Mexican-American and Japanese. 19 of

²⁹ Carlos Manuel Haro, *Mexicano/Chicano Concerns and School Desegregation in Los Angeles*, Chicano Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, CA: Author, 1977), 1-7, 18-19, 77, 80; U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Generation Deprived*, 7-15; U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools: A Status Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Feb 1979), 50-51.

the 29 elementary schools were over 90 percent white and 5 schools were over 60 percent black. There were 5 junior high schools: one had no black students, and one had 67 percent black students. The three high schools were integrated, but one school had 5.5 percent black students, while the other two schools had 22 and 29.3 percent. The average adult in Pasadena had 12.4 years of schooling, but whites in the exclusive neighborhood of Linda Vista averaged 14.9 years, while non-whites averaged 11.5 years. In August 1961 an African American junior high school student petitioned the Pasadena Board of Education to leave his segregated school so that he could attend the better white school. He was denied. With the help of the NAACP, Jay Jackson sued the Board of Education in 1961 in *Jackson v. Pasadena City School District*. The case eventually went to the State Supreme Court in 1963 and they ruled in Jackson's favor, arguing that Pasadena schools were in violation of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Court ruled, "The right to an equal opportunity for education and the harmful consequences of segregation require that school boards take steps, insofar as reasonably feasible, to alleviate racial imbalance in schools regardless of its cause." This important ruling justified racial considerations so as to more equitably promote integrated schooling; however, this ruling did not really effect the racial composition of Pasadena schools. By 1967 there was some attempt to balance out the three high schools, but in the name of community schooling, no attempt was made to integrate the segregated black junior high school or the seven segregated black elementary schools.³⁰

³⁰ William Cohen, "Pasadena," *Law & Society Review*, 2, no. 1 (Nov 1967): 42-52; Daniel E. Cummins, "Schools and School Districts: Alleviation of Racial Imbalance," *California Law Review*, 51, no. 4 (Oct 1963): 810-816.