

Lawrence Tract: A bold experiment in integrated living

Peninsula Times-Tribune, March 31, 1980

A lot has happened in 30 years

By Loretta Green

PALO ALTO — Ethel and Aurelius (Reo) Miles were the first to move in on Lawrence Lane. They occupied No. 988. Elizabeth and Dan Dana made plans to move into No. 962. Melba and Leroy "Jack" Gee later moved into No. 979 on Lawrence Lane.

The Mileses are black, the Gees are Chinese and the Danas are white.

Big deal. So, what else is new.

In 1948, when it was planned, and in June 1950, when it began to happen, it was very new and a very big deal.

It was, as Elizabeth Duveneck Dana said recently, "a very far out idea."

The place was the Lawrence Tract, the first Peninsula subdivision designed specifically as an experiment in interracial living. It consisted of approximately 23 new homes on Lawrence Lane, Colorado Avenue and Greer Road in the South end of Palo Alto.

The idea was born at a gathering of Palo Alto Fair Play Council members. The council, organized in 1945 by Gerda Isenberg of Woodside, assisted Japanese-Americans with housing and employment after their return from World War II internment and then turned to helping other minority groups as well.

As moving day approached, it appeared seven homes would be occupied by Caucasians, nine by blacks, six by Japanese and one by Chinese.

A 1950 Palo Alto Times editorial came out strongly in favor of the project. Editor Elinor V. Cogswell wrote in rhetoric appropriate to the day:

"I've just been visiting two of Palo Alto's newest homes, attractive redwood 3-bedroom houses that cost somewhere around \$9,000...First to move in were Mr. and Mrs. Reo Miles. Reo is a graduate student in law at the University of Santa Clara and his wife has just received her teaching credentials at San Jose State College. They are well-bred and intelligent people who just happen to have been born with skins we call 'colored.'"

Miss Cogswell's column urged white neighbors to be cooperative.

Another black couple moving into the tract in 1950 was Ernest (Pat) and Lula Belle Jones, who built a home on Greer Road.

"There was a Piers Dairy farm across the street so the only thing we could see was cows," said Mrs. Jones as she pulled out some old black and white photos. Much of Colorado Avenue was a weed-filled field.

Mrs. Jones, manager of the designer department at Joseph Magnin, Stanford Shopping Center, said the Lawrence Tract purchase ended their long search for a home in Palo Alto. "We just wanted to buy a house. Palo Alto Gardens just wouldn't let you (blacks) in there — no way. That was about 1948."

Not only blacks were grateful for the Lawrence Tract. In the '30s, Jack and Melba Gee were being turned down by builders because they were Chinese.

"A builder in Los Altos said, 'No, we just can't have you,'" recalled Jack Gee.

The Gees never regretted their move to the Lawrence Tract, although Gee admits they moved in primarily because it was one of the few areas available to them.

"But kids grew up under the objective for which the tract was founded in an interracial neighborhood. They grew up in the environment we wanted for them," said Gee whose only child, a son, is now an adult.

Another Asian-American couple still living in the Lawrence Tract are Chizuye and Buichi Nakata, who had the memory of three years in the Topaz internment camp fresh in their minds when they came to Palo Alto looking for housing. Gerda Isenberg helped them find housing in the Lawrence Tract.

Japanese-Americans Eunice and Tom Yanari, who own Emerson Cleaners in Palo Alto, built on Colorado in 1953 although Mrs. Yanari says they had not experienced prior housing difficulties.

"We were very happy," said Mrs. Yanari, who has lived in Palo Alto since 1937. "There were no difficulties and I think it was a good project. Everyone got along fine and that was good especially in those days when everyone was so conscious of it."

Mona and Edward Key, a white couple, were relative latecomers to the tract, first renting a home, then buying it. They learned of the street's unique history afterwards.

"We were delighted that that part of Palo Alto was integrated. Previously we had only lived in an all-white neighborhood," said Mrs. Key, director of the Ta'Enna Nursery School at the South Peninsula Jewish Center in Palo Alto.

Among those involved in the Fair Play Council were the Danas, Frank Duveneck and the late Josephine Duveneck, Gerda Isenberg, C. Stanton Selby and Paul Lawrence, a black man for whom the track was ultimately named.

"We had no illusions of solving the housing problem but we wanted to do something," Mrs. Isenberg said. "I had no more idea of how to set it up than the man in the moon. The meetings were so frustrating. My lawyers said we should give it up.

"Besides having the idea, we had to get a piece of land. Some people were very opposed and said we were building a 'nigger shack town' and I received a few unpleasant phone calls."

Paul Lawrence, then a Stanford University doctoral student, negotiated with city officials because of his talent as a mediator.

During a phone interview, Lawrence, who lives in Sacramento, recalled some of the events of 30 years ago, although he admitted he was hazy on the details.

"All of us were a little concerned when the Palo Alto city council voted not to participate in low cost housing which was then being made possible by the federal government," he said. "A group of us were talking one night and felt that if the city couldn't do anything, maybe a group of individuals could go to work and try to do something on their own."

The group located some property and Lawrence was selected to contact the realtor, who agreed to sell the entire parcel of more than 25 lots to the council for \$2,500 in cash. Ten people in the

group wrote checks for \$250, which Lawrence cashed.

When he arrived with the money the next day, another realtor was attempting to purchase it for a higher price.

"But the owner was a man of his word and said if I had the money on me, he would accept it," Lawrence said.

From there Lawrence negotiated with the city engineer for permits, engaged a landscaper and learned about utilities, sidewalks and sewers.

Lawrence never lived in the tract because he accepted a job in Washington, D.C., at Howard University, the nation's largest black school.

When someone mailed a Palo Alto Times clipping saying the integrated subdivision had been named the Lawrence Tract and one of its streets, Lawrence Lane, he was "flabbergasted."

He returned to Southern California as the first black superintendent of schools in the history of the state. But when he returned to Palo Alto in 1960 no homes were available in the Lawrence Tract. He purchased a home on the corner of Waverley and Oregon, but not before a confrontation with the realtor over selling to a black family. (Lawrence's daughters still live in Palo Alto. They are Catherine Lawrence, a teacher at Palo Alto High School, and Robin Lawrence.)

In the meantime the Lawrence Tract had rather successfully fulfilled its goal of an integrated neighborhood. In order to keep it such, the members incorporated to protect what was, in a sense, a restrictive covenant which said that a black family moving out would try to sell to other blacks, a white family to other whites and so on.

Among other early Lawrence Tract residents were: the Richard Stannards and George McCabes, who were white; Catherine and Vinson Jenkins and Shirley and Franklin Williams, who were black; the Peter Idas and Moriyō Nakamuras, who were Japanese.

The Lawrence Tract today retains many of the original families but the intended even racial ratio has fallen victim to Palo Alto's high housing cost and the tract is predominantly white.

Belle Jones still recalls the socials in the park area when their children were young.

"During the summer we'd have picnics and haul our picnic tables to the end of the cul de sac where each of us would bring a dish. I remember Reo Miles calling over the fence, 'Hey, are we Q-ing (barbecuing) today?'"

Mona Key said, "There is still a strong feeling among the founding group. One year we had the neighborhood Christmas party at our house. People who had lived here before showed up and felt they had a perfect right to come because they had lived on Lawrence Lane."

The purpose of the founding group was perhaps best described in a paper discovered recently by Elizabeth Dana. It was written by her mother, the late Josephine Duvneck, and said in part:

"Those of us who are involved in causes leading to changes in social attitudes and structures often feel frustrated by the theoretical nature of our efforts. We do a lot of talking trying to persuade by argument and oratory. Words spoken or written are, after all, only words, easily forgotten. One successful demonstration is more effective than a hundred speeches. Some of us working in the field of civil rights had this in mind when we inaugurated a small housing project in Palo Alto."

A distinguished leader recalls 'other' days

A former Lawrence Lane black resident who went on to become U. S. ambassador to Ghana says the late Joseph Eichler built him an Eichler home in another part of Palo Alto solely to keep him out of an Eichler tract.

The time was the '50s. The man, attorney Franklin Williams of New York, recalled the incident. He and his family lived at 988 Lawrence Lane and considered looking for a larger house.

As regional counsel for the NAACP and a member of a citizens advisory committee to the Palo Alto board of education, Williams was disturbed that Palo Alto had no black teachers. The

superintendent assured him he knew of no one who was qualified.

Williams told him about Willis Williams (no relation), a teacher and assistant principal in Richmond. Williams offered to sell Willis Williams his house with no down payment so anxious was he to secure a black teacher. Besides, he was interested in a home in the new Eichler tract nearby.

At the Eichler sales office he was told no houses were available. A fellow Democrat and white friend, Elie Heller (who later became a national Democratic chairwoman for California and member of the University of California Board of Regents), double checked the availability of homes and told him he had "been given the business."

That night an Eichler salesman visited Franklin Williams with a message: Joseph Eichler would sell him a house in the tract if Eichler could ask the other buyers for their approval. An angry Williams refused.

"The next night he came back and said Joe would sell it if I'd be the last to move in," Williams said. Because he had to utilize a veteran's option, he reluctantly agreed and signed over his Lawrence Lane home to the black teacher. But, word came again via the salesman that the deal was off.

"He said Eichler's sister-in-law, a partner in the business, had seen me in the office and said she objected to selling the house to a black. I got very angry and went to see Joe Eichler," Williams related. "We had a vigorous debate. Joe advanced all of the standard arguments. He was a business man not a social innovator, he said. But he said that as I was regional counsel of the NAACP, he would build a whole tract for colored people. I said that was ridiculous."

Williams said Eichler offered to build him a house anywhere else and would charge him no more than for a tract house. Then, according to Williams, Eichler himself found a large lot on Coulumbe Street in Palo Alto.

Before the project could begin, word got out that Eichler was building a house for a black family. A Spanish rug cleaner and his wife, who lived across the street, started a petition to get the property owner to back off the sale. Eichler was forced to hire counsel to make the owner sell.

"I believe then that Eichler got angry that a man with whom he had a business deal was going to back away because of a racial issue," Williams said.

Shortly afterwards, according to Williams, Joseph Eichler began selling homes in his tract to everyone regardless of race.

The fact is Joseph Eichler became an adamant and courageous leader in fairness and nondiscrimination in housing.

In July 1958 Eichler carried out a threat to withdraw from the Associated Home Builders, Inc., for its failure to go on record opposing racial discrimination in housing. He not only personally withdrew but withdrew his firm, Eichler Homes, Inc., located in Palo Alto.

Eichler had taken issue with a statement attributed to Richard Doyle, former Palo Alto municipal judge, then executive vice president of the builders group, who said, "It is a generally accepted theory that minority races depreciate property values" in housing developments.

Eichler said there were "nonwhites" in most of his subdivisions and there had been very marked increases in property values. He also said he believed other realtors "detest discrimination as much as I do" but felt they were "bound by custom and fear of financial loss."

In October of 1958 Joseph Eichler tried unsuccessfully to get Stanford University to lease 200-300 acres to help solve the problem of minority group housing.

Today Franklin Williams says he has tremendous respect for Joseph Eichler, who died in 1974.

"Though a liberal, he was no different from other builders who were afraid to violate the unwritten code of conduct of the housing industry. Whatever the forces were that made him take that halfway step with me, I think when he came up against other people's bigotry he just got plain angry and turned 180 degrees. His contributions to the achievement of integrated housing in Northern California can be matched by no one else."

Williams said in the immediate years after Eichler built the special house on

Coulumbe Street, they met at many civic affairs but Eichler never mentioned the incident.

Once when they both were invited to the same awards dinner in San Francisco, he said Eichler called and offered him a ride.

"As we rode up the El Camino I asked him about his experiences as a major open housing supporter. He told me he had never lost any business. But Joseph Eichler, not during that conversation nor at any other time before, ever suggested to me that he was aware that he had refused to sell me a house.

"However, years later when I was ambassador in Ghana, a package arrived. I opened it. There was not a letter, just a picture of a young black boy and a young white boy walking arm in arm down the street of what clearly was an Eichler tract. The inscription read:

"To Franklin, who helped make this dream possible. Joe Eichler."

—Loretta Green