CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WEST OAKLAND

ADAPTED FROM OLMSTED AND OLMSTED (1994) BY ROBERT DOUGLASS

The history of West Oakland is a chronicle of a dynamic community and the landscape that evolved around it. By far the most important force that molded and drove that community was the changing technology of transportation serving the economic development of California and the West. Perched at the edge of the continent on the San Francisco Bay, one of the world’s great natural harbors, West Oakland was destined from the start to become a key transportation nexus of the rapidly growing nation. Its location made it a natural interface between sea and land, East and West. The movement of people and goods continues to shape the human and geographical fabric of the area.

In its earliest period of development, the West Oakland region functioned as a suburban outpost of San Francisco. While the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought a mixed blessing to the Pacific Coast as a whole, the selection of West Oakland as its western terminus gave the growing settlement a strong economic backbone and placed it in a national context. Directly or indirectly, the Central Pacific Railroad provided a wide variety of jobs to generations of West Oaklanders, largely defining the community’s polyglot and blue collar nature. Opportunities afforded by the railroad attracted an array of ethnic groups whose breadwinners filled the various niches within the corporate organization and local businesses. With the exception of some anti-Chinese sentiment, the American and immigrant subsets in the population mix seem to have gotten along fairly well. That general ethnic harmony became a point of pride and a valued part of West Oakland’s collective identity.

As local interurban railroad lines and other industries became electrified around 1911, a fondly remembered “Golden Age” began in the community, fueled economically by wartime industries and lasting until the onset of the Depression at the end of the 1920s. Although World War II again brought defense industries to West Oakland, it drew a huge influx of mostly government workers, changing the traditional nature of the place. “Progressive” government planners decided that the small cottages and houses that had defined West Oakland’s neighborhoods were not fit living spaces for modern laborers and their families, and replaced much of the old built environment with bleak housing projects.

With the decline of the railroad industry and the corresponding rise of the freeway system in the 1950s, West Oakland’s character continued to change. The Cypress Freeway, connecting the Nimitz Freeway with the Bay Bridge, was built above West Oakland’s streets, further marginalizing the community while setting the scene for the earthquake tragedy over two decades later. The Cypress structure became the boundary of continued urban-renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, ironically acting to protect original neighborhoods to the west. Relocation of the Cypress Freeway after the 1989 earthquake collapse resulted in the demolition of additional portions of existing original neighborhoods, primarily industrial/commercial buildings. Some 19th-century residences were moved to new locations. The mitigation mandated by the Section 106 process engendered the historical and archaeological research described in this report, recapturing otherwise lost details of life in West Oakland’s past.
THE ROUNDHOUSE

adapted from Olmsted and Olmsted (1994) by Robert Douglass

The engine roundhouse was the central focus of the West Oakland railroad yards and shops and provided jobs to generations of area residents. Steam locomotives were fairly individualized, custom-built machines, with few standardized parts. They required, consequently, the attention of master mechanics and custom parts fabrication by skilled machinists to keep them running. A roundhouse allowed locomotives to be driven onto a turntable and rotated, so that they could be run out on radial tracks into multiple covered work bays for maintenance and repairs. Each bay incorporated a pit between the rails so that mechanics could access the running gear. Some roundhouses actually were circular, or “round.” Many, like the Oakland Point engine roundhouse, consisted of a turntable with tracks radiating to an arc (rather than a complete circle) of roofed bays, forming a shape like a pie slice. The 1878 Thompson and West Historical Atlas Map shows only the original CRR roundhouse (Thompson and West 1878). The 1911-1912 Sanborn insurance map shows three roundhouses: the original pie-shaped CRRR structure for servicing engines; a larger roundhouse a few hundred yards to the north, for the SPRR car shops; and a third roundhouse belonging to the Western Pacific Railroad to the south, near the foot of Adeline Street (Sanborn Map Company 1911-1912).

The decline of the railroads, as highway transport grew in the years after World War II, spelled the beginning of the end for the extensive West Oakland shops and yards. Most major railroads converted from steam power to new diesel locomotives with more mass-produced standardized parts between 1950 and 1956. Fewer shops, machinists, and mechanics were necessary to keep the trains running. By the late 1950s, the West Oakland yard operations had practically ceased. The obsolete engine roundhouse (and likely the car shop roundhouse, as well), no longer needed by the small crew of diesel mechanics, was torn down in 1960.

The original CPRR roundhouse at the West Oakland railroad yards and shops in the 1870s. (Photo courtesy of Bancroft Library)
PERALTA’S RANCHO SAN ANTONIO

The establishment of Spanish missions between 1770 and 1797 spelled the beginning of the end for the aboriginal way of life around San Francisco Bay. Native peoples were devastated by disease and other changes brought by contact with the mission system, and traditional lifeways were eliminated by 1810 (Levy 1978:486-496). In 1820 Luis María Peralta, commander of the guard at Mission San José from 1798 to 1800, obtained a grant to 10 square leagues of land that included the West Oakland project area. Peralta’s four sons occupied the vast holding, which was named the Rancho San Antonio. The land was formally divided among the sons in 1842, with José Vicente Peralta ending up in possession of the West Oakland area (Hoover et al. 1990:9). None of the original Peralta adobe house sites are near the project area.

Squatters, including lumbermen and cattle thieves who supplied San Francisco meat markets, were active on Peralta lands before the Gold Rush (Bagwell 1982:16-19; Davis 1929:251-253). Three squatters with speculative designs on Vicente Peralta’s land—Edson Adams, A. J. Moon, and lawyer Horace W. Carpentier—settled near the foot of present-day Broadway around 1850. They appear to have been challenging the validity of the rancho grant under the American administration. An armed posse led by Peralta and a deputy sheriff failed to eject the three, and their efforts may have actually resulted in a lease agreement with the offended owner (Bagwell 1982:27; Baker 1914:356). Other squatters flooded in: by 1852 around 50 were each claiming 160-acre parcels on the Rancho San Antonio. The shrewd Carpentier and his partners soon had their three 160-acre claims surveyed into a gridiron town site they called Oakland and began to sell lots. Carpentier, by now appointed enrolling clerk of the state legislature, succeeded in passing a bill incorporating the town. He was elected to the state assembly in 1853, and when the legislature officially recognized Oakland as a city the following year, he became its first mayor. Carpentier, aptly nicknamed the “General,” reserved ownership of the entire Oakland waterfront, a commercial empire finally recovered by the city in 1911 after decades of legal wrangling.

The West Oakland project area is contained in lands that Vicente Peralta sold off to various parties in 1852 and 1853. Portions of Carpentier’s waterfront property are likely to be within the project area. The Peralta grant, issued by the last Spanish governor of California, was finally confirmed under United States laws in 1856. Oakland’s settlers banded together to resist any potential attempts to challenge ownership of their homesteads, but such challenges seem to have never materialized (Hoover et al. 1990:18).

GROWTH AND IDENTITY: RAILROADS COME TO WEST OAKLAND

Through the 1860s, West Oakland remained semi-rural, offering different possibilities to different people, with its identity still fluid and tentative. Substantial homes on estate-sized parcels reflected the vision of some residents who saw the place as a long-term setting for genteel suburban retreats. Others, such as those who planned the Bayview Tract between Peralta and Center south of Seventh, viewed West Oakland as ideal for real estate speculation, where smaller row-house sized lots could be sold for tidy profit. At Oakland Point, a neighborhood of typical 19th-century main-street urban aspect took shape. Railway builders completed the San Francisco
& Oakland Railroad (SF&ORR) along Seventh Street in 1863, connecting central Oakland with the bay and ferries to San Francisco, and opening West Oakland up to increased settlement. By 1867, 60 children attended the public school there, and land was estimated to be worth $2,000.00 per acre (Halley 1876:177; Oakland Daily News 14 February 1867).

As the transcontinental railroad neared completion, Collis Huntington and his three Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) partners made a decision critical to the development of West Oakland. The Big Four were eager to assemble a monopolistic network of local California railroads to connect with the national line, and wanted to extend the western transcontinental rails from Sacramento to the San Francisco Bay as a part of that effort. Although a route through San Jose up the peninsula to San Francisco was almost chosen, they instead decided on the Oakland Point wharf of the SF&ORR as the western terminus of the CPRR. The crucial decision resulted not from public debate or strictly geographical reasons, but because of a sweetheart deal between Oakland founder and waterfront czar, Horace Carpentier and the railroad men. The CPRR, through its subsidiary Western Pacific, received 500 acres and two rights-of-way for its terminal facilities, while Carpentier’s remaining Oakland assets skyrocketed in value (Scott 1959:48).

As a part of the plan, CPRR acquired the SF&ORR in 1869, assuming operation of the local trains and gaining the Seventh Street right-of-way (Figure 2.1). The shops and yards of the rail giant were constructed on a site just south of the Oakland Point wharf, and a freight line to bypass residential areas was built along First Street, angling out over the water from the yards to the wharf. CPRR rails linking a line from Sacramento through Niles Canyon to Oakland were completed in the fall of 1869. Improvements to extend the wharf to deep water went on between 1869 and 1871, with the resulting structure, named the Oakland Long Wharf, projecting more than two miles into the bay. In 1876 the company built a double-track line north along Cedar Street, connecting the wharf and yards to another Sacramento route via the Carquinez Straits. The rail and marine shipping facilities continued to expand through the 1870s, leading to the construction of a massive second wharf, or mole, just south of the Long Wharf, between 1879 and 1882. The Oakland Mole, as it came to be called, was built as a passenger-only facility and terminal far out over the bay, and was used by ferry travelers into the late 1950s.

The coming of the CPRR (which merged with the Southern Pacific Railroad [SPRR] in 1885) was the defining event in the development of the local community and landscape. The enormous hierarchy of jobs associated with company operations soon turned West Oakland, and especially the Oakland Point neighborhood, into a virtual railway workers’ village, where railroad craftsmen, operators, and administrators all worked and settled at the Point in great numbers. So did local business people whose hotels, markets, iron works, livery stables, photo studios, saloons, and “female boarding houses” in one way or other served the railroad and its employees or passengers. From 1869 to the 1930s, vast numbers of Point residents are listed in directories as working for the C.P.R.R. or (after 1885 the S.P. Co.)… [Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey (OCHS) 1990(2):29].

The character of the place was determined by the nature of the work that the railroad required. The Point grew into a neighborhood comprising mostly small and modest working- and middle-class dwellings (see Groth and Gutman 1997), punctuated by shops, small businesses and industries, boardinghouses, and hotels. It was strung together by the rail lines leading out to the east and north and fixed to the nucleus of rail yards and wharves.

In Oakland, late-19th-century union activity was primarily within the building industry. Early craft unions, more social brotherhoods than labor-advocacy organizations, had formed
Figure 2.1. Snow & Roos Bird's-eye View of Oakland, 1870-1871, showing project area neighborhoods and landmarks. (Illustration courtesy of Bancroft Library)
A LONG WHARF WITH A MASSIVE MOLE
adapted from Olmsted and Olmsted (1994) by Robert Douglass

Bringing the transcontinental railroad to the San Francisco Bay required an efficient connection of freight and passengers with ferries and ships. When the CPRR acquired the existing Oakland Point pier in 1868, it was already more than a mile long. The railroad soon began constructing a series of improvements and extensions, and by 1871 multiple rail lines extended out over two miles of wharf into deep water. That year, the CPRR launched a freight ferry that could take 18 loaded rail cars at a time across to San Francisco. The new structure, known as the Oakland Long Wharf, allowed rail freight to be loaded directly onto and off of ocean-going vessels. A plan to connect the wharf to Yerba Buena Island was periodically mooted, but finally abandoned in 1873. Traffic soon outgrew the Long Wharf on account of expansion of the rail system in the 1870s. A massive wedge-shaped, rock-filled pier, or mole, was appended partway out along the wharf’s south edge between 1879 and 1882. The Oakland Mole, as it became known, was built to handle all of the passenger business, leaving the entire Long Wharf available for freight. The huge wood-framed train terminal covered more than 4 acres, with a cavernous maw gaping open on the bay to admit docking ferries. The Oakland Mole was Oakland’s main passenger depot all the way into the 1950s. Its importance faded with the decline of passenger railroads, and it was demolished in 1960.

The photograph shows the interior of the Oakland Mole passenger depot around 1931, in its bustling heyday. (Photo courtesy of San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park)

In the 1878 woodcut shown here, passenger trains come and go from dock-end terminals, while deep-water square riggers take on or discharge cargo. In the foreground, a crew of Overseas Chinese laborers awaits transportation between jobs. (Source: Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine 11 May 1878)
around individual railroad trades as early as 1863. In 1893 Eugene Debs, a locomotive fireman from Indiana, founded an inclusive industrial labor union, the American Railway Union (ARU), aimed at all rail workers (Douglas 1992:207, 210-211). The first major strike in the Bay Area played out in West Oakland, when local ARU members struck on 28 June 1894 in sympathy with Chicago-based Pullman Palace Car Company sleeping car builders as part of a called nationwide strike. The action in West Oakland, unsupported by the craft brotherhoods, was a flexing of labor muscle against the hated SRR rather than a demand for better wages or conditions. Debs had enjoined his membership against violence, but before the month-long strike was over, mob action (including an attempt to blow up a local train) brought in federal troops to suppress the strikers. The violence cost the ARU public support and worked in favor of the SRR.

WEST OAKLANDERS, 1870-1910

A wide variety of people came to work in West Oakland, to match the variety of labor niches that the railroad organization required. The many-tiered nature of work at a large railroad and its attendant trades and industries afforded opportunities to a wide spectrum of people. They ranged from poor, newly arrived immigrants to comfortably middle-class, native-born Americans with established skills and trades. The concept of “melting pot” is much debated. Taken merely to describe a coming together of disparate ethnic groups, West Oakland’s version of the melting pot in the late 19th century included populations of Portuguese, Germans, Irish, Chinese, Japanese, Americans of African and of European extraction, and numerous others.

The Portuguese, many from the Azores and Hawaii, while well-represented in the maritime industries, also came to work for the railroad, primarily as laborers rather than tradesmen (OCHS 1990 [2]:48). By 1892 Oakland was considered the unofficial Portuguese capital of California. They were often characterized as upwardly mobile, working to save for eventual purchases of farms. Germans who came to West Oakland were frequently property owners who operated retail shops and other small businesses. Many were carpenters, although more often than not they worked at building houses rather than for the Central Pacific. They were the second-largest ethnic group in the project area in 1880. The largest group was the Irish, whose numbers within the project area continued to increase over the next 20 years (United States Bureau of the Census [U.S. Census] 1880). While Irish immigrants ran businesses such as the Charter Oak Hotel on Seventh Street (Block 23) and G. Culhane’s grocery and liquor store at Willow and Pacific (Block 18), they most often worked in the low-paying, labor-intensive jobs that came under the description of “laborer.”

Chinese shrimp fishermen apparently settled near the Point very early on, in the 1850s (Bagwell 1982:87). The coming of the railroad did not directly create jobs for Chinese immigrants in West Oakland: although Chinese labor crews were responsible for building much of the Central Pacific’s portion of the transcontinental line, local trade unionists barred them from employment in the shops and yards. In 1880, six live-in domestic employees worked within the eastern project area, and a Chinese laundry operated on Block 30 (U.S. Census 1880). In 1903–1904, Chinese entrepreneur Lew Hing relocated his large cannery from San Francisco to West Oakland. The factory, five blocks north of the project area, became seasonally one of the area’s largest employers of Chinese labor, as well as of Portuguese and Italian women (OCHS 1990 [2]:50). A small Japanese community also existed within the project area, on Block 2 or 3, in the 1880s and 1890s. This 20-member enclave was associated with the Japanese Society, which
THE ARU STRIKE OF 1894

adapted from Olmsted and Olmsted (1994) by Robert Douglass

The mid-1890s found the country gripped in a depression, causing increased labor union activity. The American Railway Union (ARU), which sought to organize all railway workers without regard to individual job or craft, called a nationwide strike on 28 June 1894 to support striking Pullman car builders in Chicago. Membership in Oakland had no specific local grievances beyond the traditional general distrust and resentment of labor for corporate management: the action was viewed by both sides as a symbolic test of power between capital and organized labor. It also pitted the older established individual craft unions against the ARU.

By 30 June, Oakland train traffic was brought to a halt. The strike gained momentum as more workers signed on with the ARU, and on 5 July strikers invaded the yards, taking possession and compelling those remaining at their jobs to halt work. Local trains attempting to leave the mole were stopped by large crowds that included hundreds of women and children, some of whom joined men in lying across the tracks to make their point. Others in the crowd removed non-ARU firemen and engineers, none too gently, from their engines. Railroad management now asked for government help (San Francisco Examiner 5 July 1894).

ARU founder Eugene Debs called for avoiding violence, and beyond isolated rock-throwing and rough treatment of some by the mob, real violence had been thus far averted in Oakland. Things took an ominous turn in West Oakland when ARU men from Dunsmuir and Sacramento reportedly brought in boxcars of rifles and blasting powder (Oakland Enquirer 7 July 1894). Confrontations erupted between billy-clubbing police and strikers wielding fence pickets, and state and federal troops finally arrived in West Oakland around 10 July. Near Sacramento on 11 July, dynamite placed under a trestle derailed an Oakland-bound train, killing an engineer and four soldiers. After clashes between troops and strikers, momentum began to swing in the SPRR's favor, and Debs ordered a conditional halt to the strike on 13 July. Since the company would not meet their conditions, local strike leaders kept the strike going. An attempt was made to blow up a local train at Seventh and Kirkham streets, with little damage. The violent incidents and train service disruptions turned public opinion against the strikers, and the men began to go back to work. The last diehards gave in by 1 August (Leach 1917:270).

This engraving illustrates an incident early in the strike, when three men in a row had been induced to leave their jobs rather than to turn the semaphore switch at Seventh and Webster streets so that the local train could pass. Miss Tilson, a company station agent, faced the hostile crowd and turned the switch. She was jeered but not otherwise mistreated. (Source: Oakland Enquirer 3 July 1894)
boarded and educated new immigrants from Japan, and operated a restaurant (Oakland Enquirer 28 June 1894).

Over the years, Oakland’s Chinese were subjected to the same hostility encountered elsewhere in the state (see Yang 1999:21-22). The Workingmen’s Party, a movement to remove cheap Chinese labor from the American job market, had brief but substantial support in Oakland. This was evidenced by the election of the exclusionist party’s candidate, W. R. Andrus, as mayor of Oakland in 1878 and 1879, and a countywide referendum on Chinese exclusion in 1879 that resulted in a 9,401-to-36 vote against further Chinese immigration (Wood 1883:279-280, 839).

In 1880, 48 percent of household heads within the project area were American-born. They came primarily from the Northeast and Midwest, with a smaller number from the South. Represented among those southerners were six African American households (U.S. Census 1880). A small black community may have existed in the vicinity of Blocks 22 and 23 in pre-railroad days, as early as the beginning of the 1860s (Hinkel and McCann 1939 [2]:418-420; OCHS 1990 [2]:50). Four of the six African American household heads in 1880 were the vanguard of what would become a West Oakland core group: railroad porters working for the Pullman Palace Car Company. Pullman built and operated the deluxe sleeping cars pulled by various railroads throughout a nationwide network, and the Oakland CPRR terminus naturally became a western hub for the car company as well. By 1900, 30 men living in the project area were employed in the service sector of the railroad industry as Pullman porters, cooks, and waiters. When this labor force organized into the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Dining Car and Cooks Union, Oakland became their West Coast headquarters. The economic foothold of opportunity afforded by railroad work in West Oakland soon led to African American men branching out into such other jobs as carpentry, painting, carpet-laying, barbering, hotel work, and bartending; and to African American women working as hairdressers, dressmakers, boardinghouse keepers, domestics, nurses, and midwives. At the turn of the century, most of the African Americans within the project area owned or rented homes on Blocks 1 through 10 (U.S. Census 1900).

Native-born Americans of European descent dominated professional trade and white-collar jobs in West Oakland, in addition to the economic niche of those describing themselves as “capitalists.” Familiarity with the language, government, and economic system gave them an advantage over most new immigrants, with the possible exception of Germans, who were also fairly well-off as a group. In the 1880s households belonging to wealthier professional and managerial-level breadwinners were concentrated north of Seventh and east of Adeline, while residences along and south of Seventh, and around the railroad yards belonged to blue-collar immigrants. In the project area, the upwardly trending white Americans of the 1880s lived almost entirely in Blocks 1 through 10. Despite this general trend, an element of economic blurring existed in those wealthier neighborhoods, with a fair number of unskilled or semi-skilled immigrant laborer households mingled with the white-collar professional homes. By the early 1900s, those households supported by higher-scale jobs had all but disappeared, and West Oakland had become more uniformly immigrant and blue collar.

While the Point moved toward economic homogeneity, the multicultural nature of its population remained. Other ethnic groups, including Italians, French, Greeks, Slavs, and Mexicans, were also part of West Oakland’s mix, growing in numbers in the 20th century. With a few exceptions, West Oakland’s various groups seem to have coexisted harmoniously over the years. The notable exceptions were 19th-century anti-Chinese sentiment, which was epidemic to the whole state, and later, some almost-ritualized conflict between ethnic youth gangs.
INDUSTRIALIZATION AND PROSPERITY: REACHING BEYOND THE RAILROAD

The 1906 earthquake left West Oakland virtually unscathed. By sparing the community, however, the quake affected it nonetheless. As peninsular San Francisco’s primary transportation portal to the interior, West Oakland’s wharves and railways assumed new importance. A flood of refugees went out from, and vast amounts of rescue and recovery materials went into, the quake-and-fire-ravaged city by way of the Point, setting an industrial and population growth spurt in motion. Many San Francisco businesses that had been wiped out by the quake and fire relocated to West Oakland or elsewhere in the East Bay, rather than rebuilding at their old locations. Increased labor needs of such industries seem to have resulted in a demographic shift: comparison of the 1900 and 1910 census data shows a decrease in single family households and a greater number of lodgers over the decade (U.S. Census 1900, 1910). There was no jump in residential construction, suggesting that existing homes were converted to accommodate boarding situations (OCHS 1990:238). Grain milling, canning, lumber planing, iron works, and miscellaneous light manufacturing were some of the types of industries moving into West Oakland at the time (Sanborn Map Company 1911-1912). Many of them moved into newly filled tidal lands near the railroad yards and elsewhere along the waterfront, surrounding rather than displacing the existing residential neighborhood.

Electrification of local railways came early to Oakland, which by 1892 had one of the most extensive networks in the nation (Bagwell 1982:68). That year, the Eighth Street horse car line into West Oakland was electrified. By 1902, “Borax” Smith’s Key System had established electric train lines from outlying suburbs to a new ferry pier at the present Bay Bridge alignment. The quiet, clean electrics were much preferred by Oaklanders over the smoky, chugging steam engines still used by the SPRR on its local lines, and in 1908, the railroad giant began electrification of its locals. The Seventh Street rail line that formed the axis of West Oakland was converted by 1911, and the new Red Trains were immediately popular with local travelers. Local historian Vernon J. Sappers (1993) viewed the advent of the Red Trains as marking the start of a nearly two-decade-long “Golden Age” for West Oakland. The direct effect of the change was a great improvement to the quality of life along the Seventh Street corridor as the air and noise pollution of the old engines disappeared. Indirectly, the line actually increased train traffic on Seventh Street, and the improved access to new peripheral suburbs may have hastened the departure of some families from the Point. The line was extended almost to San Leandro in 1913. The electric locals opened up new outlying areas for development, and true suburban living became more attainable for more urban middle-class householders.

World War I ushered in a new level of economic activity in West Oakland, with the expansion of existing firms such as the Moore & Scott shipyard at the foot of Chestnut and Adeline streets, and with new industries coming to the area. With a growing fleet of ferries, the SPRR also operated their own shipyard at the Point. The influx of workers brought new prosperity to local consumer businesses. Commuter traffic to San Francisco grew as well. Seventh Street was not only the route for the Red Trains that ran every 20 minutes, but had become the main artery for growing automobile traffic to and from the auto ferries now run by the SPRR. Business along the corridor boomed, continuing through the 1920s.
Francis Marion “Borax” Smith had made a fortune mining borax in the deserts of southern California. He turned to East Bay real estate development in the 1890s, shrewdly realizing that an efficient transportation network would turn cheap rural land into valuable suburbs. Acquiring various local rail lines, he had consolidated them by 1902 into a single electrified system, known as the Key System, linked to cross-bay ferries at a pier adjacent to the present Bay Bridge alignment, within shouting distance of the Oakland Long Wharf.

E. H. Harriman started out as a New York stockbroker, but decided instead to make his fortune in railroads. He began to take over poorly managed lines and make them successful. By 1901 Harriman had obtained the SPRR and controlled more railroads than any other single American. He reportedly harbored a personal dislike for Borax Smith, and was rankled when Key System trains came into the SPRR’s Oakland stronghold. The electrics — quieter, cleaner, and simply more modern than the old steam locals— were immensely popular with East Bay commuters. In 1908 Harriman began to electrify the SPRR’s locals, and like all of his projects, made a first-rate, state-of-the-art job of it. The Seventh Street line was completely rebuilt by 1911 to handle the heavy, independently powered cars, costing the company millions but gaining much local goodwill. The corporate giant had showed its cared about the community. Gone were the noisy, chugging steam locomotives casting their sooty pall along the route. The improvement in quality of life that the new Red Trains brought changed the character of the historic corridor through West Oakland, making large areas much more livable.

While the ethnic makeup of the Point during this “Golden Age” has not been the subject of detailed study, it appears that the same mixture found there in the first decade of the century continued to characterize the area. The war and subsequent legislation restricted European immigration to the United States during the period, and was probably reflected somewhat in West Oakland’s populace. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the children of prewar Irish and Euroamerican railway workers moved away to other neighborhoods (West of Market Boys’ Journal var.). An increase in African Americans from the South, gravitating to an established African American enclave, offset any declines. As the nation was poised on the brink of the economic collapse, West Oakland was a mature, ethnically mixed community of working- and middle-class residents, a pleasant place where people got along well.
JACK LONDON:
OAKLAND’S RELUCTANT NATIVE SON

Mary Praetzellis

The Oakland Visitor’s Bureau proudly proclaims Jack London Square as a “special spot at the water’s edge where places for shopping, dining, and day dreaming are all waiting for you.” Oakland exalts in the claim their city can make upon one of America’s most famous authors—visitors can follow the “wolf paws” etched on a path to London’s waterfront haunts. Ironically, Jack London had no such heartfelt ties to Oakland, although the city itself takes center stage in many of his best writings. Jack spent a painful adolescence in Oakland and fled the place and its memories at his first brush with success.

Jack London was born in San Francisco in 1876, the son of Flora Wellman, a runaway from a respectable Ohioan family and follower of spiritualist astrologer “Doctor” William Chaney, who is widely believed to have been Jack’s father. When Jack was still an infant, Flora married John London, a widower with two young children. The family lived briefly in Oakland from 1879 through 1881 and then moved back to Oakland when Jack was 10, after the family lost their Livermore ranch to foreclosure. The family’s fortunes continued on a steady decline from a position of middle-class respectability and land ownership to the precarious footing of the laboring class, John working by the hour as a night watchman and renting by the month. Flora contributed to the household’s income by sewing, teaching piano, and taking in roomers. Jack also worked, delivering newspapers, setting up pins in the bowling alley, and sweeping out saloons on Sundays (Stasz 1988:16-26). Between 1886 and 1891, the family moved no less than eight times, and many of their residences stood within a few blocks of the Cypress Freeway Replacement Project corridor (Haughey and Johnson 1987:8-16). Between 1888 and 1890, they lived at 807 Pine Street on Block 20, immediately adjacent to the Southern Pacific Railyards.

In Oakland Jack London discovered three things that framed his future: a love of books and knowledge at the public library, an attraction to liquor and desire for camaraderie at the public-house, and a dedication to the socialist cause and the struggle of the workingman in the factories and on the streets. Jack London graduated from grammar school in 1891 and took a job at Hickmott’s cannery to help out his family. Deciding not to be a “work-beast,” Jack left the factory and began a series of adventures as an oyster pirate, hobo, miner, socialist, and seaman. He sailed to Japan on a schooner and crossed the Chilkoot Pass to try his luck in the Klondike gold rush. Upon his return in 1899, Jack focused on writing as he penned stories about what he had seen on his travels. Houghton Mifflin published The Son of Sea Wolf, a collection of Yukon stories, in 1900; it proved to be in their top five sellers that year. Jack and his family left the flatlands of West Oakland for the more fashionable foothills in 1901, and in 1905 Jack London moved to rural Sonoma County and developed his “Beauty Ranch,” where he lived until his death in 1916 at age 40.

Jack London was an incredibly successful and prolific author. He wrote 1,000 words a day, often before lunch. To meet this goal, he wrote about things that he knew, and Oakland was one of those things. Oakland figures prominently in many of his best novels: The Iron Heel (1908), Martin Eden (1909), John Barleycorn (1913a), and Valley of the Moon (1913b), as well as in many essays and short stories.
In his novel *Valley of the Moon*, Jack London sited his figurative struggle between Capital and Labor in West Oakland—a very logical choice, as the streets and railyards of this city had seen many actual battles. From the front window of his family’s home on Pine Street, Jack had had a good view of the comings and goings at the Southern Pacific Railyards. It is from this cottage that Saxon, London’s heroine, witnessed a brutal confrontation between strikers and Pinkertons. The violence of the event caused the young woman to think deeply about the modern, urban way of life and to conclude that, in London’s words, “jobs are bones” (1913b:189) over which poor men fight; and that “the man-world was made by men, and a rotten job it was” (1913b:254). “Her eyes showed her only the smudge of San Francisco, the smudge of Oakland, where men were breaking heads and killing one another, where babies were dying, born and unborn, and where women were weeping with bruised breasts” (1913b:256). Even the clams that people gathered from the nearby marsh caused typhoid fever, “still another mark against Oakland, she reflected—Oakland, the man-trap, that poisoned those it did not starve” (London 1913b:286). Saxon’s sentiments are hardly material for an Oakland Visitor’s Bureau brochure.

In the midst of her despair, Saxon meets a boy—who surely represents Jack London himself—who casually speaks the words that would change her life: “Oakland,” he says, “is just a place to start from” (London 1913b:267). Saxon then begins her journey to the rural Valley of the Moon, a natural world where men didn’t fight over bones.

But Jack London did not only write about labor and capital, he provides everyday details on what his characters wore, what they ate, their surroundings, their pastimes. *Valley of the Moon*, for example, touches on housework, cosmetics, underwear, fishing, gangs, prostitution, roomers, and the interior and neighboring surroundings of the cottage at 807 Pine—where London lived as a boy. All of his observations are in detail and all are specific to West Oakland. *Martin Eden*, the rags-to-riches story of a young West Oakland man who becomes a successful author, provides a wealth of detail on laundry work, Portuguese immigrants, dental care, rooming, and more (London 1909). References to this material can be found throughout this volume, which acknowledges a debt to the observations of Jack London.

Jack London’s boyhood home at 807 Pine Street on one of the Cypress Archaeology Project blocks. (Photo courtesy of California Department of Parks and Recreation)
DEPRESSION AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The brutal economic realities of the 1930s left their mark on the people and landscape of West Oakland. A virtual standstill in the construction and capital-goods industries in the early 1930s hit shipyards, machine shops and metal works, and the building trades. Severe cutbacks by the SPRR kept the company solvent, unlike many American railroads during those hard times, but a large number of jobs were lost, and those workers who did stay on the company rolls often had very limited employment. Less affected were the Point’s consumer goods manufacturers, such as the canneries and other food processors. Although employed, the unskilled labor at such firms would have suffered from the overall Depression-era reduction in wages. The construction of the Bay Bridge between 1933 and 1936 must surely have provided employment and increased business for some West Oakland residents, but its completion set in motion changes that would radically alter the character of the transportation-driven community.

As the western rail terminus for the SPRR system, West Oakland received its share of down-and-out Dust Bowl refugees, many of whom arrived penniless on the freight cars. Various “hobo jungles” or camps sprang up in the area, including “Pipe City,” a village of inhabited large concrete sewer pipes along the tracks on the waterfront. The unemployed could eat at church or government soup kitchens, or buy a large bag of broken cookies for a nickel, at a factory near Fourth and Adeline Streets (Sappers 1993). This period may have contributed to a decline in the Point’s traditional ethnic harmony: “One old-time German-American West Oaklander...blamed the Depression for the end of an era when ‘West Oakland was everybody,’ saying that ‘Okies and Arkies brought Jim Crow in’” (OCHS 1990 [2]:53). Besides documenting a perceptible deterioration in black/white relations, the statement also displays a resentment of the then-newest arrivals, characterized as “Okies and Arkies” by some older residents.

By the late 1930s, West Oakland’s built environment was showing the stress of the Depression. Financially strapped working- and middle-class householders were concerned with survival, and house upkeep was not as much of a priority as in better times. This lack of resources for maintenance, combined with the advancing age of most of the houses, contributed to a general degrading of the neighborhoods. While the Seventh Street commercial corridor still preserved a fairly prosperous appearance, residential areas began to grow seedy with neglect. The attention of social planners turned to West Oakland, and at the end of the decade, several blocks in the center of the community were condemned as a “slum” and their houses were bulldozed out of the way. Replacing the homes in 1941 was the barracks-like Peralta Village, one of California’s first public-housing projects. In 1942 the once-grand McDermott Estate, the last large chunk of green space in West Oakland, was also razed for a housing project. Both were used for housing mostly newly arrived war-industries workers. The definition of portions of the community as slums did little to instill civic pride in the remaining homeowners.

World War II brought increased shipbuilding and the construction of the huge Oakland Army Base and the Naval Supply Center on filled tidelands. War-industry jobs did improve prosperity, but while bolstering West Oakland’s economy to a degree, the new military installations were essentially stand-alone entities. Spatially separate, they did not integrate much with the community, nor substantially boost commerce on the Seventh Street business strip, which was suffering from the bridge-induced shutdown of the auto ferries and, in 1941, the discontinuance of the Red Trains. Many of those West Oaklanders who had done well during the war moved away afterward to a better life in the suburbs.
WORKERS’ HOMES IN WEST OAKLAND

adapted from Olmsted and Olmsted (1994) by Robert Douglass

West Oakland neighborhoods were somewhat mixed economically, but ranged from working class to middle class in general character. Wealthier (middle-to upper-middle-class) residents, as a rule, tended to live farther away from the railroad yards and freight lines. Working-class housing was often smaller and inwardly focused, with fewer concessions to architectural fashion and social rules than middle-class housing. Yards were fenced and often used for practical purposes. As part of the Cypress Archaeology Project, two general types of workers’ houses have been proposed: the Informal workers’ cottage and the Almost-polite house (Groth and Gutman 1997). The first tends to have plain exteriors, well-utilized porches and yards, and minimally specialized rooms. The latter, grading more toward middle-class ideals, features decorated façades and organized interiors comprising single-purpose rooms.

The 1931 photograph reproduced here shows a row of working-class housing one block south of the project area’s Block 5 at Third and Filbert streets. The buildings all appear on the 1889 Sanborn insurance map (Sanborn Map Company 1889). Although the second house contains two flats (note the double entry doors), and the third is a duplex (the two identical gabled fronts are actually wings of a single building), these homes all seem to fall within the range of the Informal workers’ cottage style. The yards are all fenced, and a small utilitarian garage has been tacked on the second house with little regard for appearance. Since the houses date at least to the 1880s, they were likely to have originally had backyard outhouses, but by the time of the photograph, back-porch toilets were the norm. While the neighborhood looks clean and neat, it appears that most of the houses are in need of paint; this probably reflects the hard times of the growing Depression.

Typical West Oakland houses at Third and Filbert streets in 1931. (Photo reproduced with permission from Vernon J. Sappers)
SINCE THE WAR: CONTINUING CHANGE IN WEST OAKLAND

America was changing the way it traveled and moved goods. West Oakland’s fortunes had been tied to transportation from the beginning. First the automobile ferries, then the construction of the Bay Bridge, then the demise of the interurban electrics, signaled the shift from rails to highways that would change the face of the community. The age of the railroads was in recession, and the dieselizeation of the main-line locomotives from 1950 to 1956, with its lower maintenance and increased use of standardized parts, made the SPRR’s extensive Oakland yards largely obsolete. The facility was essentially shut down in the late 1950s, its roundhouse demolished, and employees reduced to a skeleton crew of diesel mechanics. The Oakland Mole lingered, deserted and ghostlike, until its 1960 demolition. Trains leaving Oakland dropped from 40 per day in the early 1950s to 3 at the end of the 1960s.

As the system of freeways grew around the Bay Area and the rest of the nation, the original Cypress Freeway was designed as an efficient connector between the Bay Bridge and the Nimitz Freeway. It was completed in 1957, resulting in the demolition of buildings on Blocks 1 through 11 and physically dividing West Oakland. At the same time, as the de facto western limit of area “slum clearance,” it acted to partially protect the neighborhoods between it and the bay. Urban planners of the late 1960s and early 1970s, attempting to demonstrate inclusiveness toward a disadvantaged community, imposed a massive Post Office facility on the neighborhood and ran the new, elevated BART line up Seventh Street. The Post Office and its parking lots destroyed six blocks of Bayview Tract houses from the 1870s and 1880s, and the new BART station and its parking lot cleared several more blocks, while elevated BART tracks assaulted the remaining integrity of the historic Seventh Street corridor.

On the eve of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, West Oakland had suffered through years of economic decline. Unemployment averaged 21.5 percent, and with a median income of $13,123.00, more than 35 percent of area residents lived below poverty level. It was a community of renters: only 15 percent of the district’s 8,735 housing units were owner-occupied. The ethnic mix had come to include a majority of African Americans (77.3%), with Euroamericans (11%), Hispanics (5.7%), Asians and Pacific Islanders (3.5%), and Native Americans (0.3%) making up most of the rest (Caltrans 2002:3-4). Although the Port of Oakland continued to play a vital part in America’s economy and required a large work force, relatively few Point residents worked there then or now. After the Cypress structure collapsed, activists insist on avoiding past mistakes and eager to improve and revitalize the once-thriving community, succeeded in working with Caltrans to move the alignment of the rebuilt Cypress to the current project area.

As it always has been, West Oakland today remains a vibrant neighborhood. There are, to be sure, many problems still facing its people. Some positive changes are resulting from the quake tragedy, in the Point’s identity and landscape. A renewed awareness of past and place are directing movement into the future, as residents become reacquainted with local history, property owners restore 19th-century houses, and developers build new housing with a fresh sense of historical perspective.