



Erased by Eminent Domain:  
**“The City May Be Gone, But the Memories Live On”**  
Russell City 1853-1963

Presented by: The Russell City Arts Committee

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*Aerial Picture, Hayward Airport and Russell City, 1948.  
(Photo courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)*

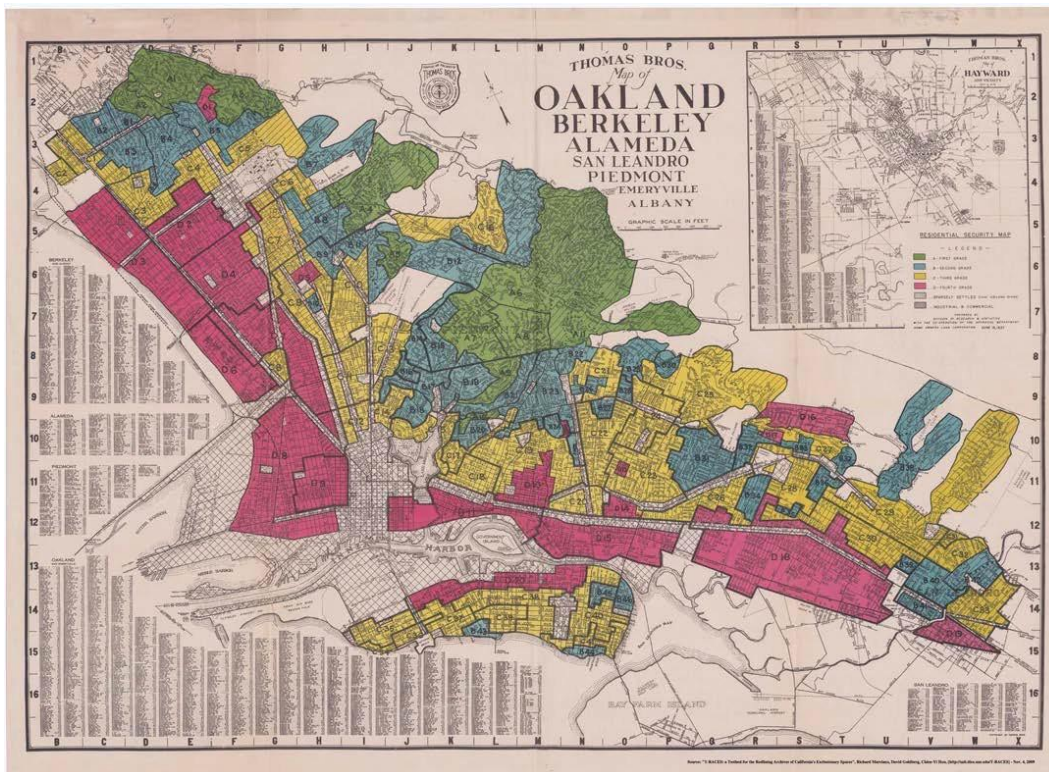


*Maps of Russell City with street names—circa. 1950.  
(Photo courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)*

## Introduction

Russell City, a once vibrant and culturally rich community located just 10 miles south of Oakland, California, near the Hayward shoreline, tells a powerful story of resilience, displacement and the ongoing fight for equity. Through the lens of former Russell City residents and their descendants, this article highlights the community’s ongoing struggle for restitution as they continue to fight for the reclamation of their land and the restoration of their dignity for past injustices.

From humble beginnings near the Bay, Russell City became a beacon of unity and diversity, transcending the artificial divides of race and wealth. It was a welcoming sanctuary during an era when systemic racism and discriminatory practices like restrictive covenants, redlining, exclusionary zoning and predatory lending were commonplace.<sup>1</sup> By the 1950s, Russell City was a vibrant community of about 1400.



*“Redlining” map of a portion of Alameda County. Green zone denotes good; Red Risky. From Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America; Nelson, Robert K., LaDale Winlin, et al. 1937 Home Owners Loan Corp map; San Leandro - B40-42, D19, C33.*

Despite outside factors, the people of Russell City were hopeful, believing in the promise of their town. They were determined to build a thriving community and achieve the American dream of homeownership and acceptance even in the face of systemic neglect. They were all searching for utopia.

Over time, the town developed a unique character all its own—a mosaic of cultures, homes, and

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rothstein, *Color of Law*, 2018

people, setting it apart from surrounding communities. The town's uniqueness, and ultimately its downfall, lay in its diversity and the patchwork landscape it created. Some occupants lived in quaint homes built by early Danish settlers; others built their own solid, well-crafted homes. Meanwhile, those with fewer resources were forced to build humble, makeshift, hastily assembled dwellings, often lacking basic amenities such as running water, sewage systems or indoor plumbing. For many families, only well water was available to meet their daily needs.<sup>2</sup>

The town's strategic location near the Bay— and close to a railroad station, an airport, an Air National Guard Armory and various already established industries—should have made it a hub of opportunity. Instead, it became a target for exploitation. Prosperous industries such as dairies and salt businesses, along with nearby facilities like Hunt's Cannery, could have served as pillars for economic growth, benefitting not just Russell City, but the entire region. However, Alameda County and the City of Hayward systematically obstructed essential infrastructure improvements, denying the community access to basic necessities. This was not a mere oversight, but a calculated move to devalue the land and displace its residents, making it easier to take control.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these immense hardships, local leaders mobilized their neighbors, encouraging participation in meetings, and public hearings, protesting the government's attempts at land seizure. They did everything in their power to prevent displacement, standing firm against the forces threatening their community. Their battle was not just for survival, but about defending the right to exist in the homes and community they had built with their own hands.<sup>4</sup>

By 1963, the once-thriving community of Russell City had been uprooted, its land seized and repurposed for industrial development. Families received minimal payout, often a fraction of what their properties were worth. Through a combination of eminent domain and forced evictions, families were displaced, and their homes—once filled with hope and the promise of a better life—were reduced to rubble and the vibrant community that had thrived against all odds was demolished and erased from the map. Though Russell City families were forced to scatter, and their support networks were fractured, their collective identity that gave the community its strength and cohesion never unraveled. The community did not lose its value even when it was torn asunder by local governments.

The government disregarded the fact that these homes represented more than just property; they embodied the heart and soul of the community —they held the dreams, histories and a deep-seated sense of belonging for those who lived there. The financial compensation was not only grossly insufficient, but it also failed to account for the deep emotional and cultural significance these homes held. The forced displacement not only demolished physical structures—it shattered a way of life, severing bonds cultivated over generations. The loss extended far beyond the land—it was a devastating

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<sup>2</sup> Oakland Tribune 3/30/1962; 5/22/1963; 7/9/1986

<sup>3</sup> Oakland Tribune 3/8 & 5/24, 1963; 9/15/1965

<sup>4</sup> Oakland Tribune 11/8/1962



loss of identity, heritage and community.<sup>5</sup>

Today, as former residents and their descendants continue to demand justice, they seek more than just financial restitution—they seek recognition of the lasting cultural and emotional impact of their loss. The fight is about restoring dignity and preserving a history that systemic forces tried to erase. The pursuit for justice is also a fight to protect the memory and legacy of the place they called home.

The story of Russell City serves as a powerful reminder of how marginalized communities are stripped of their opportunities, displaced and erased from the narrative, all while their land is appropriated for the benefit of others.

The following sections will delve into the unique cultural, social and economic dynamics of Russell City, along with the external forces that ultimately led to its destruction.

## **Growth and Development: Tracing the Origins of Russell City**

To fully grasp Russell City’s story of exploitation and erasure, it is essential to first examine its origins. Inhabited by the Ohlone tribe until 1789, the land was subsequently taken over by Spanish colonizers and later by American settlers. The City of Hayward and its surrounding region are built on the ancestral homelands of what is now known as the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>6</sup>

Mission San Jose was founded in 1797 by Catholic missionaries. It was part of a string of missions that extended from San Diego to the San Francisco Bay Area. The missions were used as a tool of the Spanish crown to claim and control new lands that expanded their empire around the world. The missions lured and then forced indigenous groups to move to the mission where they were taught Catholicism and European ways. Mission San Jose covered thousands of acres of land, including what became Russell City, that was traditionally inhabited by the Yrign Ohlone, just one of many family groups that made up the Ohlone tribe.

The missions effectively ended the Ohlone’s traditional way of life—bringing in cattle that trampled the natural environment which impacted Ohlone food sources, introducing a new religion and, especially, bringing European diseases that Ohlone had no immunity to fight. The tribe was devastated not only by the forced learning of new ways of life but also by the immense loss of life from these new diseases. Even after the missions were ended and Mexico took over the territory of California from Spain, Ohlone were not able to return to their previous life because former mission lands were then given to Mexican soldiers and gentry who created massive ranches up and down the coast.

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<sup>5</sup> Oakland Tribune 10/3/1993

<sup>6</sup> citation 8, Bauer, 75-81; Hayward Area Historical Society (HAHS); Ballena Press, 1995

Then the Gold Rush of 1849 brought an influx of settlers from around the world to California. Even though the Ohlone land was southwest of Gold Rush territory, it still had a profound impact on the East Bay region. Many former gold miners passed through the area traveling to and from the mining district, and they soon turned their attention to the Hayward area, hoping to become farmers. They squatted on traditional Ohlone land, claiming it for themselves, further displacing the indigenous people.

Despite enduring generations of displacement and loss, the Ohlone remained steadfast in their commitment to preserving their traditions and ensuring their legacy was passed on to future generations.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary Ohlone activism has led to several successes, including the revitalization of Ohlone languages and the protection of Shellmounds and land. The city of Berkeley transferred ownership of the sacred West Berkeley Shellmound site to the Ohlone Tribe in March 2024, at a total cost of \$27 million. The city contributed \$1.5 million while the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, an Indigenous-led land trust, raised the remaining \$25.5 million.

This historic event serves as a powerful reminder that the history of the Ohlone is not just a story of the past, but a living and evolving narrative. Former members of the Russell City community can draw inspiration from the determination of the Ohlone. As Melisa Nelson of the Sogorea Te' Land Trust remarked, the preservation of sacred Ohlone lands “may be an example of what is possible for all cities and other places around this country.” Her words resonate with the ongoing efforts of those from Russell City and their descendants, as they continue to fight for reparative justice to reclaim their land and restoration of their community’s history and cultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

## Founding of Russell City in 1853

In 1843 the Mexican government granted Guillermo Castro a 27,000 acres land grant while his sister and brother-in-law, Francisco and Barbara Soto, were granted 7,000 acres. Their combined land covered present-day Hayward, San Lorenzo and Castro Valley.<sup>9</sup>

Russell, as the area became known, was founded in 1853 as an unincorporated community in Alameda County, California, by failed gold miner Joel Russell, an Englishman from Maine, who had attempted his luck in the gold mines. As with most gold miners, he started farming on the rich land. In addition to farming, Joel was an abolitionist, educator, Hayward city attorney, justice of the peace and a pillar of the community. His ethos laid the groundwork for a community later united in courage and acceptance. Russell lost interest in farming his land when he got more involved in politics and sold off some acreage to new immigrants to the area, mostly Danish.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> HAHS curriculum

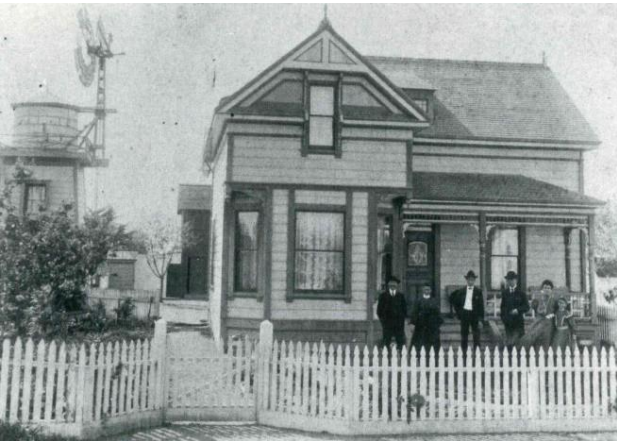
<sup>8</sup> CBS News Bay Area, March 2024

<sup>9</sup> HAHS; <https://www.greatamericanstations.com/sttions/hayward-ca-hay/>

<sup>10</sup> Oakland Tribune, 7/9/1986



*Two examples of traditional Dutch-style homes in Russell City: The Christenson House & The Madsen House, late 1800s (Photo Courtesy of Hayward Area Historical Society).*



In the 1870's a small Danish farm community was established with about a dozen homes built by the Danish craftsmen, earning the nickname "Little Copenhagen". This name was used more frequently than Russell. The Danish families were interested in the salt marshes and the natural bay landing where sail boats transported grain, hay, and produce to markets in San Francisco and returned with boatloads of lumber and building materials.

Streams and sloughs wove through the natural habitats surrounding the Bay. The slough near the "Bay at Russell" was turned into a dock, later known as Barron's landing. The dock was connected to the center of Hayward by Russell Road, further enhancing the area's potential as a shipping hub. Russell City, as a name, does not come into use until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

Russell sold land to the Southern Pacific Coast Railroad in 1877, paving the way for the growth and establishment of a railway station. This development played a pivotal role in the community's growth and solidified its connection to the broader region. By 1878, the Southern Pacific Coast Railroad Company extended its line between Alameda and Los Gatos, including stops in Mt. Eden and Russell, making the area known for the speed and efficiency of moving both passengers and freight. The establishment of the railway station played a pivotal role in its growth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Brightside Newspaper, 1980

<sup>12</sup> Daily Review; Brightside, 1980





*Andrew Johnson, a station agent for the Southern Pacific Coast Railway Station in Russell City, 1878. (Photo Courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)*

Jessen's Landing opened nearby in 1880, increasing Russell's prominence in transportation. In addition to its growing role in trade, the area became known for its salt production, utilizing the nearby salt ponds. The little town further expanded its economy with a thriving dairy industry, producing milk, cheese and butter for markets in Oakland and San Francisco. The success of these industries solidified Little Copenhagen's reputation as a productive and vital community in the region.<sup>13</sup> After Joel's death in 1888, his son Frederick, partnered with a real estate consortium to transform the bayside property into an upscale suburban community. The development was named after Frederick's father and later became known as Russell City. The area was marketed for its "perfect climate" and easy commute to San Francisco and Oakland.

By 1908, the lots were subdivided and sold for \$200 and up, with the hope that after the 1906 earthquake, many San Franciscans would relocate to Russell City. Although the ambitious promotional materials depicted palm-lined streets and parks, Russell City did not experience the anticipated influx from San Francisco. One major factor contributing to this was the lack of essential infrastructure. Sewer systems, utilities, as well as curbs and gutters, were never installed in the community. This lack of infrastructure severely hindered Russell City's growth and appeal as a suburban destination. To make matters worse, a statewide economic depression further diminished the prospects for the suburban development Frederick Russell had envisioned.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Brightside Newspaper, 1980; Oakland Tribune, March 30, 1953

<sup>14</sup> The San Francisco Call, December 23, 1909; July 1912; Oakland Tribune, March 30, 1953

## Cultural Melting Pot: “A Shared Dream” for Immigrants and People of Color

Although Fredrick Russell’s original vision for Russell City did not come to fruition, a new community soon emerged, offering a haven for those unwelcome elsewhere in the Bay Area. In Russell City, people of color had the opportunity to find a home of their own. This diverse community included members of the Yrgin/Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, as well as Japanese, Hawaiians, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Latinos/Mexicans and African Americans. Together, they formed a rich tapestry, creating the cultural melting pot that it came to be known for.<sup>15</sup>

By 1916, among the early pioneers to settle in Russell City were Jose and Josefa Liranzo. Originally from Spain, the Liranzos had moved to Hawaii before making their home in Russell City where they became the largest diversified farmers in the community. They cultivated a vast area, which included both their own property and additional leased lands, now part of what is the Hayward Airport. Other early settlers included the Rodriguez and Bias families. It was the strength of community and kinship, exemplified by these foundational families, that became a defining force in the identity of Russell City.

*Four generations of the Rodriguez/Bias family attending a gathering for a family picture at the home of family matriarch, Victoria Bias, on Russell Road in Russell City, CA. (Photo courtesy of Cathy Rodriguez)*



<sup>15</sup> Labors Edge: Views from the California Labor Movement, 2013



In the 1940s and 1950s, Russell City experienced considerable population growth due to an influx of African Americans migrating from the South to California to work in the shipyards. At the same time, White migrants from the Dust Bowl, and an increasing number of Mexican workers arrived through the Bracero Program-- a collaboration between the U.S. and Mexican governments designed to address labor shortages in the railroad and agricultural industries. They sought affordable housing and a welcoming community in the face of widespread racial discrimination prevalent in the broader society.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning in 1945, the citizens of Russell City endured two decades of legal wrangling over their efforts to get surrounding municipal entities to deliver water, build sewer lines, conduct road maintenance and provide sufficient police and fire services to the area. This reinforced the diverse population's need for self-reliance. In turn, this strengthened its role as a haven for those seeking belonging and acceptance.

Perhaps the local government's continued oppression only strengthened the resolve of the community, innocently defying those filled with hate. Russell City truly embodied the essence of a "village" coming together to support each other, pooling together what little they had and ensuring that everyone had access to food, water, shelter and that their children received a good education.

## Residents Purchase Fire Truck

Russell City made considerable efforts to improve their community. Under the visionary leadership of Mr. Buster Brooks, chairperson of the Russell City Improvement Club, and founder of the Russell City Fire Department, the community came together to protect itself against fires that threatened their homes and livelihoods. Through their collective efforts, the community successfully raised funds to purchase their own fire truck, made possible through community pledges and a bid-



*Demetrius Kimble, Sam Barret, Kenneth Garcia, Buster Brooks and one other take a picture with the Russell City Firetruck. (Photo courtesy of Gloria Moore)*

<sup>16</sup> Daily Review, Brightside Newspaper 1980



whist tournament that netted \$75.00.<sup>17</sup> This ingenuity and determination demonstrated that the entrepreneurial spirit of newcomers to the West was found in even the most remote and oppressed areas. Kenneth Garcia served as Chief of the Russell City Fire Department until his military deployment. Upon his departure, Assistant Chief, Al Santucci, was promoted to Chief. Chauncey Pryor was also a member of the Fire Department.<sup>18</sup>

## Education and Enrichment: Libraries, Schools, Scouts, Boys Club and Spiritual Roots

Early on, members of the Danish community built their own school and library. Mrs. Anna Nygren acted as librarian for 41 years in one of the first Alameda County Branch libraries from its opening in 1922 to 1963 when it closed.<sup>19</sup> The library was enlarged in 1950 to meet the increasing demand from the community.

*Russell Branch Library, 1950. (Photo Courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)*



<sup>17</sup> Daily Review, April 4, 1947

<sup>18</sup> Hayward Review, 1944; Megan Wilkinson, May 2011

<sup>19</sup>Brightside, May 25, 1980

In 1940, a “modern” school facility was built using Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds replacing an original school built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dedicated teachers at Russell School inspired and nurtured their students, fostering a love for learning and strong values that extended beyond the classroom and into the heart of the community. Outside the classroom, additional opportunities for growth and development existed as well. They ensured that every student, regardless of their background, received a quality education and had opportunities to participate in enriching experiences such as field trips, music programs, after-school activities, teen clubs, theater programs and sports teams.



*Original Russell school built in 1895.  
(The Daily Review Brightside, May 25, 1980)*



*New Russell School.  
Built in 1940.  
(Photo Courtesy of the  
Hayward Area Historical  
Society)*





Russell City School teachers; from left to right, first row: R. Hanson, Mary del Michels, Gertrude N. Knowles, Jean Dernos (Mrs. Sorenson), Vivian Abbott, Ruth Halverson. Second row: Livingston, Mrs. Scott, Eva White, Mrs. McWhinney, Mrs. Worthey, Mrs. Manthey, Baker, Hicks, Townsley, Hengel, Mrs. Burgess, and Mrs. Metty. (Photo Courtesy of Sam Nava)



Russell School, Level 12, 1953.  
(Photo Courtesy of Zenobia Kimble)



Russell Elementary School Graduation, 1955.  
(Photo courtesy of the Hayward Area Historical Society)



## Russell City School Cultural & Sports Activities

*Student, Zenobia Kimble wins trip to the nation's capital to receive the National Freedoms Foundation Award. (Oakland Tribune, March 10, 1954)*

Russell School was more than just an educational institution—it was a community hub. Local divisions of the Brownies and Girl Scouts provided young girls with a chance to learn and thrive. Meanwhile, the local Russell City Improvement League established a “Boys Club” aimed at instilling the values of service and community in young boys, promoting character development and social responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

In 1950 and 1953, Russell School was one of 10 schools in the United States recognized by the Freedom Foundation for excellence in the “programs of teaching the fundamental freedoms of the American Way of Life.”

The playground was always open for kids to play together, whether it was tetherball, baseball, dodgeball, basketball or even roller skating. It was a vibrant gathering place where local children could come together and enjoy each other’s company. John Rawls, a product of Russell Elementary and Hayward Union High School, grew up in Russell City and went on to play professional football.

Many of the youth were Russell Public School Traffic Patrol Officers. They enjoyed wearing the red and white uniforms and directing traffic to ensure students crossed the streets without incident and arrived at school safely.

### Russell City Student Prepares for Big Trip Representative Chosen for Trip to Receive National Freedoms Foundation Award

HAYWARD—A visit with vice-presidential staff enough to keep a 13-year-old eighth grader awake nights from now until May, and Representative George Zenobia will go to Valley Forge P. Miller and Sen. William F. with Mrs. Eva White, eighth grade teacher, to receive Russell City's principal award, recently won in national citizenship competition.

Add to that a probable airplane trip to Valley Forge, and there's

Tentative trip plans include two days in New York and another two days in Washington, D. C.

**ZENOBIA, ONE OF FIVE BROTHERS and sisters, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Demetrius Kimble, 25131 Jefferson street. She was one of six finalists selected to be interviewed by the judging committee, made up of Mrs. Ethel S. Ward, assistant county superintendent of curricular services, Mrs. Naomi S. Trovich, coordinator of psychological guidance and child welfare services for Alameda county schools, and Earl E. Johnson, personnel relations director of Oliver United Filters.**

Competing with Zenobia for trip honors were Faye Gallant, Manuel Alvarez, Wayne Johnson and Beverly Brown, all freshmen students at Hayward high school now (the award was made on the basis of last year's work), and Vincent Gilmore, seventh grader at Russell school.

Zenobia was chosen on the basis of her school grades and her leadership in school affairs, as well as her day-to-day demonstration of good citizenship. She is secretary of Russell's Girl Scout troop, and is girl's captain of the junior traffic patrol.

**BOYS AND girls of Russell school already are planning a Zenobia week for her. They expect a daily news communique from her while she's away, and are commissioning her to keep a complete daily diary so that they can relive her steps with her upon her return.**

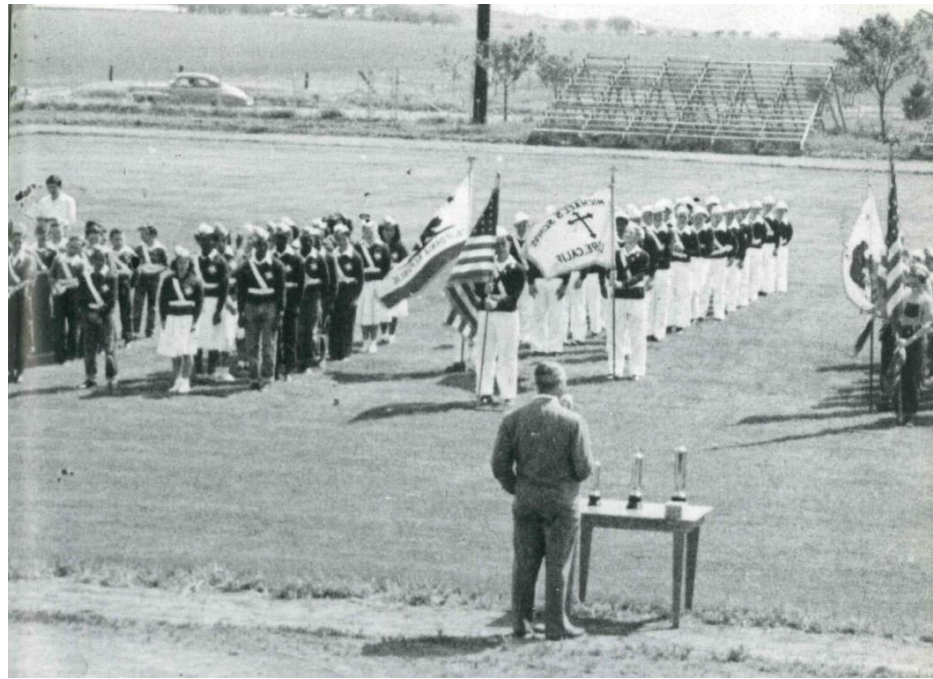
This is the second time Russell school has received a principal award from the National Freedoms Foundation. The last winner, Martha Jo Burn, now a senior in Hayward high school, made the week's trip, not only as a representative of Russell school, but of the entire Hayward area, for her wardrobe and incidental expenses were provided by service organizations of this area.



**WINS TRIP . . . Zenobia Kimball, right, Russell school student, and her eighth grade instructor, Mrs. Eva White, will travel to Washington, D. C. because Zenobia won top honors in a national citizenship contest. (Fairchild studio)**

<sup>20</sup> Oakland Tribune, March 4, 1947

*Russell School Public School  
Traffic Patrol Squad, Central  
Valley Regional Competition,  
1949. (Photo courtesy of the  
Hayward Area Historical Society)*



*Students vs. faculty playing  
volleyball at Russell School.  
(Photo courtesy of the  
Hayward Area Historical  
Society)*

*America's past-time: a  
young woman swinging  
a bat on a softball field  
at the home batter's box  
position. Russell City.  
(Photo courtesy of the  
Hayward Area Historical  
Society)*





On Friday nights, the school's auditorium was transformed into a lively teen club, organized by Russell School's Cafeteria Manager and Hayward Area Recreation Department (HARD) employee, Elgie Tolefree. After Elgie's retirement from HARD, Rudolph Brooks took over the role. The teen club was a popular hangout spot for local youth, offering a safe and fun space to socialize and engage in various activities. One year, four of the club's officers had the opportunity to attend an area-wide teen conference at Asilomar in scenic Monterey, California. This conference provided a platform for teenagers from different schools to come together, develop leadership skills, share ideas and build connections with one another.

*Brownie Troop marching in the annual Hayward Pet Parade, 1950. (Photo courtesy of Hayward Area Historical Society)*



*Teen club members sitting on a Rock in Monterey, CA in 1958. Myrtle Johnson, Gloria Bratton, Oralean Trotter, and Venita Tolefree. (Photo courtesy of Gloria Moore)*



*Picture of Girl Scouts; Cheryl Sanders, far left, with troop leader and other Scouts. (Photo courtesy of Sanders Family)*



## Spiritual Roots of Russell City

The spiritual heart of Russell City thrived within its seven diverse churches, some offering services in Spanish. The Iglesia Apostólica de la fe en Cristo Jesús was located on Adams Street at the corner of Second Avenue. Its congregation, led by Pastor Celso Moran, built their own church using adobe, a method where they mixed mud with their feet and added grass to bind the material together. The result was a building with walls reminiscent of those in Mexico. This church was later relocated to Harvey Avenue in Hayward. The Catholic Church, on Washington Street, was uniquely constructed from tin. The First Baptist Church of Russell City, originally located on Adams Street, was moved to Maud Avenue on Kelly Hill. The True Holiness Church was located on Russell Road.

These vibrant centers of faith attracted worshippers from beyond Russell City, weaving a rich and inclusive tapestry that warmly embraced and supported the diverse population of the area.

*Joe and Elvira Cota singing during services held at the Iglesia Apostólica de la fe en Cristo Jesús Church in Russell City. Eleazar Rodriquez playing bass guitar; 2 unidentified musicians; John Reymundo playing banjo, 1962. (Photo courtesy of Joe Cota, via: Maria Ochoa, Medium.com)*





*Ramona Diaz's  
Wedding at the  
Iglesia Apostolica de  
la fe en Cristo Jesús  
Church in 1957,  
Russell City. (Photo  
Courtesy of Liz  
Moran & family)*



*New Location of the  
First Baptist Church  
of Russell City on  
Maud Avenue, Kelly  
Hill, Hayward, CA.  
(Photo courtesy of  
Hayward Area  
Historical Society)*

## Former Residents & Descendants Share Memories from the Past

Russell City was more than a place to live; it was a thriving neighborhood built on a foundation of camaraderie, sharing, education and faith. The community's rich history is woven with countless memories, traditions and shared experiences that made it a special place. In the stories that follow, we explore the heart of Russell City, uncovering the joys, challenges and everyday moments that shaped this extraordinary community. Through their own voices, we revisit lively gatherings, cherished traditions and unforgettable characters that made Russell City a truly unique and memorable home:

- ▶ **Community Gatherings:** Every Fourth of July, and on other holidays, the community gathered in an open field on Washington Street for lively celebrations. The night sky would light up with fireworks, while children happily twirled sparklers. Families gathered to share an array of delicious foods, from soulful African American barbeque to a vibrant mix of Latino, Mexican, Puerto Rican and other cultural dishes. Each family proudly brought their signature home-cooked dishes, creating a flavorful feast for everyone to enjoy.

These celebrations symbolized the unity and shared pride, blending different cultures and traditions into one joyful experience. Each gathering reinforced the idea that Russell City wasn't just a collection of "blighted" houses; it was home, where families and friends came together to create lasting memories, strengthening the fabric of a diverse and resilient community.

- ▶ **Annual Carnival:** The fun rides and games at the carnival brought joy to both children and adults alike. This event was one of the highlights of the year for many, offering a brief reprieve from the challenges of daily life in Russell City. However, one year, as Sam Nava and Deborah Harris recall, the fun was overshadowed by a serious incident when a rider was injured after falling from the Ferris wheel, resulting in a broken arm. This mishap ultimately led to the carnival leaving Russell City for good, relocating to a site near the airport on Hesperian Boulevard.
- ▶ **Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus:** Students at Russell School eagerly awaited their annual field trip to attend the circus held at the Municipal Auditorium in Oakland.
- ▶ **The Alameda County Fair in Pleasanton:** Families looked forward to attending the Alameda County Fair in Pleasanton. The youngsters not only enjoyed the fair food, but also looked forward to the petting zoos, pony rides and games offering fun prizes.
- ▶ **The Hayward Plunge, Memorial Park:** Friends from Russell City often walked to the Hayward Plunge, located on Mission Boulevard in Memorial Park, to swim in the local pool. The pool opened to the public in 1936. Although they were not always welcomed at the pool, the youth remained undeterred, determined to swim and have fun. The plunge served as a swim location for Hayward Union High School students who were bussed from school for Physical Education swim classes. Meanwhile, the Girl Scout cabin in the park offered a range of activities for the



local Brownie and Girl Scout troops, making Memorial Park a fun spot for community youth.<sup>21</sup>

- ▶ **Neighborhood Tales:** The story was often told about the wild horse belonging to the Johnigans on Russell Road which frequently ran free, creating chaos and sending everyone scrambling. Just down the road from the Johnigans, another neighbor owned a flock of sheep and would lead them through the streets of Russell City every day.
- ▶ **Gardens, Wildflowers & Farm Animals:** Families took pride in their extensive gardens; golden California poppies flourished throughout the neighborhood fields. A variety of farm animals such as sheep, chickens, pigs and rabbits, were raised, not only to feed their own families, but also to share and feed their neighbors.



*Chicken farm in Russell City. (Photo Courtesy of Maria Ochoa, via Medium.com)*

- ▶ **Living Off the Land:** Many often ventured into the nearby fields to hunt quail, duck and other wildlife. These outings were more than just a way to put food on the table; they were opportunities to connect with the land and share in the satisfaction of a successful hunt for prey.
- ▶ **Summer Fun, Earning a Living and Summer School:** During long summer days, children would walk down the railroad tracks to nearby Mt. Eden to pick currants, peas, and tomatoes. Meanwhile, others headed in the opposite direction, walking along the tracks or down Russell Road to Hesperian Boulevard, to attend summer school at Arroyo High School. They looked forward to stopping at Winchell's Donuts on Hesperian Boulevard for a special treat. Some picked cherries on Russell Road while others rode their bicycles to Kelly Hill to pick apricots earning money for school clothes. For those taking on heavier work, a bus, driven by the Green family, would transport workers to Tracy where they would spend long, hot days laboring in the agricultural fields.

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<sup>21</sup> HAHS 5-26-2011

- ▶ **Childhood Memories and Local Legends:** Trilby Reynolds shared vivid memories in a newspaper article: “As children, they climbed up the railroad’s high-water tower where the locomotives filled up with water, and swam in the tank. The hobos camped in Russell City and the Gypsies arrived every winter in train ‘wagon cars’ and stayed the season to make wooden furniture to sell in the spring. The kids were exhilarated when they arrived and would run throughout the neighborhood screaming, “The gypsies are here, the gypsies, are here”. The Reynolds family often shared the story about Johnny Harris, the wolf man, who was in trouble with the Alameda County officials for raising wolves, mountain lions and a couple of hyenas in his father’s wrecking yard. Later, however, Johnny toured America with some of the animals to talk about the preservation of wildlife and was once featured on the Johnny Carson Show.

Albert Pacheco fondly recalls his childhood in Russell City as a 13-year-old paperboy. After delivering the Daily Review throughout the neighborhood, he would always make sure his final stop was at the Horat Dairy. He loved helping pour milk over the washboard into trays, but what excited him most was enjoying a refreshing glass of ice-cold milk to end his day. In addition to his paper route, Al played alto saxophone in the Russell School orchestra, a passion that stayed with him; he can be seen playing his saxophone in the mural on page 29 of this document. While attending Hayward High School, he was an athlete participating in varsity baseball, football and basketball.

- ▶ **Education and Family Legacy:** All of Reynolds’ children attended Russell School—a Reynolds was in just about every class. When the new school was built in 1940, a Reynolds, Raymond Reynolds, was in the first grade. “And I was the last graduate out of the new school in 1961” he stated.<sup>22</sup>



*Community Advocate, Trilby Reynolds (Photo courtesy of Hayward Area Historical Society)*

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<sup>22</sup> Brightside Newspaper Article, Sunday May 25, 1980

► **Childhood Adventures:** Oralean Trotter-Stone, a student at California State University, shared her memories in a student newspaper article: “Growing up there was a unique experience. During the weekdays, my father, Beamon Trotter, a resident of this quasi-rural community worked hard in the construction industry putting down black-tops. Most of the other men worked in the shipyards. In the evenings, he and my mother, Edith Trotter, my sisters, five brothers and I irrigated small crops of corn, cabbage, tomatoes, mustard greens, and potatoes. We hand-pumped water from a well, transporting it to the plants with buckets. Afterwards, we fed the chickens, rabbits, and hogs. When my chores were done, I would spend hours playing with the other children in large empty lots. We played hide and seek in the uncultivated fields, where the grass was so high the tops of young children’s heads were not visible. The railroad’s huge water tower was a favorite swimming place.”<sup>23</sup>

## Legends of Russell City: The Brooks and Nava Families

The sense of community and the resourcefulness of families like the Trotters was mirrored by other pioneering families, such as the Brooks and Nava families, whose contributions to Russell City left a lasting impact.

**Buster and Evetta Brooks:** Buster Brooks was a trailblazer. He moved to Russell City with his wife Evetta Brooks in 1941, leaving their roots in Oklahoma behind and built a home for their family of six children. Buster worked tirelessly to develop the land he owned, always with future generations in mind. His efforts extended beyond his family, as he sought to improve living conditions for the entire Russell City community.

A true pioneer and visionary, Buster Brooks constantly challenged societal oppression and pursued his vision of equity and inclusion. He played a pivotal role in establishing the Southern Alameda County Chapter of the NAACP and became its first president. His dedicated service to the community, earned him the affectionate title of “Mayor of Russell City.”

Decades later, his leadership and humanitarian efforts were formally acknowledged by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors through a Recognition Proclamation. Among his many accomplishments, in 1941, Buster established the Russell City Improvement Club leading it as president until 1945. He also founded the Russell City Fire Department, serving as its president from 1945 to 1951. Most notably, Buster was deeply committed to saving Russell City from destruction under eminent domain, fighting tirelessly to protect the community he loved, standing up against the government forces that sought to displace its residents.

Buster Brooks’s impact is one of leadership, community service and an unwavering commitment to

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<sup>23</sup> African American Cal State University Hayward student recalls her childhood in one of Hayward’s original communities—Oralean Trotter-Stone



preserving the heart and soul of Russell City. His example of service and dedication to humanity lives on in his many descendants, a true legacy.



*Celebrating Buster Brooks's 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday in 1985 with a few of his grandchildren. From top left: Gilbert, Irana, Sean, Monique, LeMarius, Alicia and Johnny; bottom left: Kelly, Buster, Margot and Cathy.*

**The Ernesto Nava Family:** Ernesto Nava, known as the last living son of Mexican General Pancho Villa, made Russell City his home until its destruction in 1963. Born in Mexico, Nava moved to New Mexico at a young age with his mother, who sought to protect his life. She feared that if Pancho Villa's enemies discovered Nava was his son, they would kill him. When Nava was eight years old, his mother revealed his true parentage and made him promise to keep it a secret. It wasn't until after her death that Nava felt free to break his promise and disclose his father's identity.

Ernesto was celebrated throughout his life, often participating in events that honored his legendary father. According to an article in the "Tri City Voice" newspaper, Ernesto arrived in California at age 19

with only fifty cents in his pocket. After a brief stop in Los Angeles, he traveled to the Central Valley where he worked as a crop picker. By 1939, he had moved to Pescadero, where his son, Sam Nava, and his second daughter, Elizabeth, were born. In 1941, shortly after his eldest daughter Rachel moved from Las Cruces, the family relocated to Russell City. The move allowed them to be closer to the Apostolic Church where they worshipped and to accommodate Ernesto's job working on the railroad and in the shipyards.



*Russell City Legend, Ernesto R. Nava. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Rodriguez). Tri City Voice, January 27, 2010.*

Ernesto built a successful career as a plasterer, becoming the first Hispanic contractor in the area. In addition to his plastering business, he owned a store in Russell City, and a restaurant in Alvarado. Ernesto's son, Sam, continues to share captivating stories of his father's adventures and enduring spirit and remembers him as a larger-than-life figure: "strong"; "a legend in his own right"; "superhuman"; "macho"; and a hardworking man." Ernesto's legacy lives on through his many children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Ernesto passed away in Castro Valley on December 31, 2009, at the age of 94. In recognition of his impact on the community, the Hayward City Council adjourned its January 19, 2010, meeting in his honor.

## Economic Landscape: The People and Businesses of Russell City

Families invested in the community by buying land and building homes, as well as launching a variety of startup businesses. Their efforts contributed to local economic growth even as they navigated building restrictions imposed by Alameda County, which had jurisdiction over Russell City.

Agricultural operations were an important part of Russell City's economy—especially dairies. In 1925, six brothers from Switzerland, the Horats, settled in Russell City and established a successful dairy at the end of Russell Road, near the Santucci Hog Farm. Joseph Horat lived on the family dairy property until 1986. Other prominent dairies in the area included those of the Holdener and Carmenzind families.

In January 1932, Russell City was listed as the foremost dairying center of Southern Alameda County. Joseph Holdener led the industry rankings, with Louis Carmenzind and the Horat brothers securing second and third, respectively. The Holdeners' dairy was located directly behind the Old Russell School, and they operated another dairy to the north along the railroad tracks.<sup>24</sup>



*Horat Brothers standing in front of their farm, 1919. (Photo Courtesy of Hayward Area Historical Society)*

By the 1950s, Russell City had evolved into a thriving community of approximately 1400 people who brought their diverse talents, skills and an entrepreneurial spirit to the table. Numerous enterprises flourished, including restaurants, cafes and nightclubs.

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<sup>24</sup> Oakland Tribune, Jan 5, 1932





*Pictured is Mrs. Octavia Tolfree, standing proudly in front of one of the family's many trucks.  
(Photo Courtesy of Deborah Harris)*

Other businesses included dairies, a hog ranch, dry cleaners, a feed store, auto repair garages, janitorial services, trucking companies, grocery stores, an upholstery shop, as well as a hotel and gas station.

Home-based ventures provided beauty and barber shop services. A few entrepreneurial men from the community operated shoeshine stands. One was located across from Doggie Diner on Hesperian Boulevard in Hayward. The guys could “throw a rag” and they made a lot of money. The Reynolds family-owned Jack’s Salvage Yard, Jack’s Service Garage and Reynolds and Son’s Trucking, and the family had salvage rights to seven garbage dump areas.<sup>25</sup>

The Lopez family owned a very popular restaurant and bar renowned for its delicious meals and welcoming atmosphere. It served as a friendly gathering place for everyone who walked through its doors.

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<sup>25</sup> Oakland Tribune, May 26, 1960; Brightside, May 25, 1980

*The Lopez  
Family  
California Café  
in Russell City  
(Photo  
courtesy of the  
Hayward Area  
Historical  
Society)*



Russell City Hayward Ca

## **Music and Culture: Preserving the Rhythms and Reverence, An Anthem of Endurance**

Russell City was a mecca for blues music, which flourished during the post-war period from the 1940s to the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> It encapsulated, elevated and celebrated the humanitarian essence of soulful melodies. Russell City was home to several popular nightclubs, including the Russell City Country Club, Mrs. Alves, and Pittman’s Rendezvous. Mrs. Alves served as both a nightclub and a family-friendly restaurant where patrons could enjoy meals together. Leona Alves, the club’s namesake, and ardent community activist, allowed local organizations to use the club as a convenient meeting place.

The music scene was not simply entertainment; it was a fundamental part of Russell City’s identity and communal life. As African American musicians migrated north, Russell City became a lucrative stop for world-renowned blues musicians such as Ray Charles, Etta James, T-Bone Walker, Lowell Fulson and Big Mama Thornton. The city also nurtured local talents, including Billy Dunn, who began performing there at just 16 years old. Notably, Billy shared the stage with Big Mama Thornton, who originally recorded “Hound Dog” in 1952, showcasing the city’s significant contribution to the blues scene. Billy fondly recalled the Country Club “as a rustic venue with sawdust and straw on the floor, like a country shack where people went to have a good time”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Daily Tribune March 30, 1953

<sup>27</sup> YouTube Interview with Billy Dunn & Bobby Web: <http://pastaandpresentm>, Feb 15, 2014



Decades later, Mrs. Alves' granddaughter, Francesca Hightower, fondly remembers sneaking out of bed to watch guitar player LC Good Rockin' Robinson perform at the niterie while her mother, Barbara Hightower, worked. LC accompanied Mercie Dee Walton and John Lee Hooker on recordings. Robinson's studio album "Oakland Blues" was released in 1968 by World Pacific Records.<sup>28</sup>

These noted musicians honed their musical talents on stage in Russell City, capitalizing on opportunities to play for African American audiences and leaving an indelible mark on the city's expanding music scene.<sup>29</sup>

The West Coast Blues Society, a non-profit organization, proudly perpetuates the legacy of Russell City and its significant impact on music history by organizing the annual "Hayward-Russell City Blues Festival." This vibrant festival honors the rich musical and cultural heritage of Russell City.<sup>30</sup>



*A Mural on the side of a building at 1070 A Street, completed in 2012, pays tribute to Russell City. It features the Russell City train station and celebrates local figures like James R. and Faustino Figueroa Jr. with their 41 Chevy. The artwork depicts a band with lead singer Charlie Bell Sanders accompanied by saxophonist Albert Pacheco, trumpeter Roy Beltran, guitarist T-Bone Walker, with Ray Charles on piano. In the background, the Russell City Country Club nightclub and baseball player Joel Arellano in front of an unidentified man, and the historic Russell Public School in 1916.*

*(Photo Courtesy of The City of Hayward)*

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>29</sup> Portions from Oralea Trotter-Stone article; Oakland Tribune, April 8, 1959

<sup>30</sup> Oakland Tribune, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1993





*Mr. and Mrs. Manuel & Leona Alves, in front of “Mrs. Alves Nightclub & Restaurant.” (Photo courtesy of Francesca Hightower Thomas – Mrs. Alves Family)*

*Diners enjoying a night out at Mrs. Alves nightclub, and restaurant. (Photo courtesy of Francesca Hightower Thomas – Mrs. Alves Family)*



*Mrs. Alves Nightclub & Restaurant also hosted many community and social events such as the “Russell City Ladies Social Club” Fashion Show, circa 1953. (Photo courtesy of the Doris & James Sanders Family)*



*Russell City Country Club. (Photo Courtesy of Hayward Area Historical Society)*

## Russell City Labeled as “Blighted” to Justify Eminent Domain

Notwithstanding their entrepreneurial achievements, the struggle for basic infrastructure became a defining part of Russell City’s history. As mentioned earlier, beginning in 1945, a two-decade battle ensued with government officials to obtain essential utilities for their community.

In 1947, following an appeal from 200 Russell City residents, the Hayward City Council acknowledged Russell City’s water issues as a “health menace”. The Council directed the city manager to investigate the cost of providing water, either by extending city water lines or developing wells at the Hayward Municipal Airport to assist Russell City with its water problem.<sup>31</sup> At that time, the City of Hayward did not extend the water lines, claiming the cost was too high, and Alameda County was unwilling to help cover those costs. Russell City was located in an unincorporated area falling under the jurisdiction of Alameda County. The State of California also denied the community’s request for assistance in installing water lines as did the Oro Loma Sanitary District when community leaders proposed possibly annexing to their water district.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the fact that the community worked hard to create a safe and supportive environment, the area continued to be plagued by the presence of environmentally hazardous businesses. Many of these were located at the end of Russell Road, including a dairy, a dump, a junkyard run by “Junkyard Brown,” a wrecking yard and the Russell City Hog Company/Santucci Farms. These businesses not only contributed to the area’s notorious reputation for its overpowering stench but also posed

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<sup>31</sup> Oakland Tribune, Nov 20, 1947

<sup>32</sup> Megan Wilkinson, Google, 2022

significant health risks. The Santucci Hog Farm moved to Russell City due to its less regulated environment, allowing them to operate without the stringent restrictions and protests they encountered elsewhere. As soon as visitors crossed the railroad tracks into Russell City, the smell was overpowering.<sup>33</sup>

Adding to the environmental degradation, the Hayward Sewage Disposal system had a sewage outfall line into the bay near Russell City, further polluting the area. Since 1947, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors had frozen residential construction in Russell City, and by the early 1950s the county began referring to the community as a “blighted” area in contrast to its active local economy.<sup>34</sup> County officials started discussing redevelopment, though they were quick to state that Alameda County had no obligation to provide sanitation and water to Russell City, declaring: “The County cannot take money from its taxpayers and use it for the blighted areas which has no special district of its own. In 1956, the Eden Taxpayers Association identified local garbage dumps as serious health hazards, noting that they turned into “exposed cesspools” during the rainy season.”<sup>35</sup>

Alameda County officials spent years debating how to address the challenges in Russell City, yet took no meaningful action to support the community. Out of 24 square blocks, only four streets were paved. In 1957, additional obstacles were faced when the county began denying building permits, preventing homeowners from improving their properties. At the same time, a County Planning Commission secretary stated that “once fresh water and sewage inadequacies are erased”, he thinks [a] subdivision development would take place, but at a cost of \$515,000” to the County.<sup>36</sup>

## **Alameda County Rejects Federal Funds for Resident Assistance**

In March 1957, Alameda County Supervisor Frances Dunn and Arthur Hoff of the U.S. Urban Renewal Agency convened two meetings to discuss the future of Russell City, which had been declared a “slum” by the Alameda County Grand Jury. The first meeting was organized by the Russell City Community Services District, chaired by Chauncy Pryor, while the second was sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

At these meetings, Hoff outlined a \$1,040,000 redevelopment program, with the federal government willing to cover two-thirds of the cost. The remaining funds, however, would need to come from the city, county, or local taxpayers. Hoff emphasized that Russell City was eligible for federal aid due to its “blighted” status, whether through urban renewal or a relocation program. However, concerns quickly arose, with Buster Brooks voicing the community’s apprehension, about the potential negative impact of urban renewal.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Oakland Tribune, October 24, 1962

<sup>34</sup> Oakland Tribune, July 1958

<sup>35</sup> Oakland Tribune, February 20, 1962

<sup>36</sup> Oakland Tribune February 24, 1953

<sup>37</sup> Oakland Tribune, March 14 & 19, 1957



While the community appealed to officials, Alameda County Supervisor Francis Dunn Jr. and Hayward City Manager Douglas Smith opposed the redevelopment of Russell City as a residential area. Instead, they advocated for the conversion of the land for industrial purposes. The community's pleas for redevelopment that would preserve their homes were disregarded. The final blow came when the Grand Jury issued its final report recommending that studies be conducted to determine if those now living in Russell City could be relocated through some sort of urban development plan. They suggested that Russell City be either demolished or, even more drastically, pushed into the Bay.<sup>38</sup>

In pursuit of this agenda, Hayward enlisted Alameda County's help to form a Redevelopment Agency for the Russell City Project, appointing George Herron as Executive Director and selecting Russell City citizen Chauncy Pryor to serve on the agency's Citizen's Advisory Committee. However, by 1961, the county's redevelopment plans faced criticism from Oakland Mayor Houlihan, who spoke out during an Alameda County Mayor's conference. Houlihan strongly opposed the county supervisors' decision to redevelop Russell City without federal urban renewal funds.<sup>39</sup> The county decided to forego urban renewal funds and financed the project with local public agency funds. This decision allowed them to proceed without being required to provide relocation support.

The County's decision to reject federal urban renewal funds significantly impacted Russell City. Without federal assistance, individuals faced significant hardships, as they were forced to leave their homes without the zoning regulations, resale guidelines, and new public housing provisions that federal funding could have provided. As a result, the once thriving and close-knit community became fragmented, and many struggled to find new housing and rebuild their lives. The loss of Russell City's unique cultural and social fabric, was irreplaceable, leaving a lasting impact.

The community endured economic hardships largely due to the government's refusal to provide essential services. However, they defied common stereotypes associated with impoverished areas, demonstrating their unwavering spirit and self-sufficiency. Remarkably, most of its residents did not rely on public assistance. According to an article in the Oakland Tribune in March 1961, data provided by Welfare Director, Harold Kehoe, revealed that only 72 out of a population of 1,500 to 1,600 received welfare assistance, and residents would be able to pay reasonable rents wherever they relocated. This assistance was mostly directed towards those with specific needs, such as the blind disabled, elderly and the 28 families with needy children.<sup>40</sup>

This data stands in stark contrast to a 1963 statement by George Herron, Executive Director of Alameda County's Redevelopment Agency, who claimed: "Russell City could not have made it, even with utility lines. Too expensive, too much absentee ownership (most are renters)." Herron's assertion cast doubt on Russell City's viability to sustain itself even if it had access to an improved infrastructure, echoing a narrative that many government officials and agencies perpetuated. These

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<sup>38</sup> Daily Review 11/17/56, Oakland Tribune, May 1957

<sup>39</sup> Oakland Tribune, December 9 & 13, 1961

<sup>40</sup> Oakland Tribune, March 15, & 22 1961

perspectives ignored the residents’ self-sufficiency and economic contributions.<sup>41</sup>

As the threat of displacement loomed, Russell City refused to back down, and their determination was on full display during a series of public hearings held to discuss the proposed redevelopment plans.

## Public Hearings: Fighting to Keep their Land

Undaunted by the overwhelming opposition they faced, Russell City residents were determined to

make their voices heard. Over the course of three public hearings on January 8, 15 and 22, in 1963, the residents of Russell City offered powerful testimonies against the proposed redevelopment plan for their community. More than 400 people gathered at the Hayward Veterans Memorial Building to challenge the County’s decision to label their community as “blighted.” The County proposed a redevelopment plan costing \$1,843,500, which sought to replace the residential neighborhood with an industrial park.<sup>42</sup>

Numerous speakers, including several attorneys, voiced objections and raised critical questions about the implementation of the plan. Among them were the following speakers:

- ▶ Mrs. Pauline Touchette of 2091 W. Winton Ave. told the board that no one was going to get her property.
- ▶ Miss Mary Ellen Richardson of 2415 W. Winton Ave. contended that the county staff reports make Russell City “sound like it’s beyond hope.”
- ▶ Mr. Floyd Hughey of 2149 Nebraska

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*A List of families who testified during 3 days of public hearings-- Excerpt from Hearing Transcript, 1963. (Transcript provided by the Doris & James Sanders Family)*

<sup>41</sup> Oakland Tribune, 1963, Herb Michelson

<sup>42</sup> Oakland Tribune, January 16, 1963

Street, who built his dream home in Russell City, said he did not want anyone to relocate him and warned supervisors that the Lord wasn't pleased with their plan and was going to punish them.

- ▶ Mrs. J. M. Henry, who purchased her property for \$7,500, also provided testimony during these hearings demonstrating the local government's strategic depression of the community, stating that she was told to fix her house and she responded with: "What I want to say, I own the property at 2254 W. Winton Ave. We want to fix the house. I had a little flood in the small part, the garage part of the house. I went up to this Redevelopment Agency, they gave me - they told me to go and lift this house, which I couldn't do that. I go back to them. They come out, 'Well, you fix this house.' All right. I go and put out my money to fix this house, got it up - here they send some man down, Mr. Harper - that's right, Mr. A. L. Harper - and stick this on it (exhibiting document). This house was too good, they said - this was too good for temporarily. Well, I told them I wasn't going to live in water when I could do better, and they - this is what they stick on my house, to stop the - the house is halfway up now, and if they would let people in Russell City before. If they had told me that when I was buying - paying that \$7,500 for it, I wouldn't have been there. They didn't say that. They wait until I got it paid for, tell me now I can't fix the house and are going to give me a fair price - they are going to give me all my money back. I put a lawn; it was a mudhole - I put 200 loads of dirt in that place to fill it up. I got a nice place. My children graduated from Hayward High; they are gone now. So why do I want to move now all over the world when I got a place? Just let me finish it, fix it. We fix it up. Now allow me a break - not stick these tags on the house and holler rat the people 'nasty rathole.' It's no ratholes in my house. It's not nasty in there, either - you better know it. You think it's nasty? Come in anytime and find out if it's nasty. Then if you find rats there, then, I'll pay you for them - all the rats you found around there. It's lot more people out there. I want to fix the house. I got proof. The house is up there now, and then they go stick this - this thing. I take it off. And after this meeting I'm telling you right here, after this meeting - I told them, after this meeting, if it doesn't come to something, I'm going to fix my house - and don't nobody bother me, don't bother me."

In answer to questions during the hearings, Harold Davis, agency relocation supervisor, said no one knows how much owners would receive for their properties since they have not been appraised.<sup>43</sup>

## **Russell City Plagued by Fires: Lacking Water, Tragedy Continues to Strike**

In 1957 four children died in a fire that destroyed their home and that of a neighbor. The tragedy was exacerbated by the slow response of the nearest Alameda County fire department, which was eight miles from Russell City, as well as the lack of access to water. Russell City had no fire hydrants. These

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<sup>43</sup> Reporter's Transcript of Public Hearings on The Russell City Redevelopment Project January 8, 15, 23, 1963/"Blight" newspaper article



factors hampered every effort to quell the fire when it broke out, compounded by the fact that the volunteer Fire Department did not have enough funds to maintain their equipment. The only equipment the County had was a 15-year-old truck with a 300-gallon water tank, insufficient to eliminate the fire.<sup>44</sup>

Fires, and the lack of firefighting equipment, continued to plague Russell City, especially in the initial years of the County's redevelopment effort. Vandals set fire to one dilapidated building after another. In 1963, during the hearings on the redevelopment plan, an arsonist struck the area with six fires in one week. In March 1963, the 11-member Stinson's home was destroyed by fire along with all their belongings. The fire marshal stated there was a fire happening every night in the area. In March 1965, arsonists set fire to more than 100 structures in the area, eighteen in a single night.<sup>45</sup>

Between January and April 1965, Russell City experienced 20 fires, with five occurring between April 12 and 30 alone. During this period another fire burned 17 structures and blackened 23 acres. This blaze also meant that at that point, over 50% of Russell City had been burned. Although most of the buildings were abandoned, many families and individuals still lived in the area. Among the well-known landmarks to burn were the home of Buster Brooks, the Country Club nightclub, the hotel and one of the grocery stores.<sup>46</sup>

*A house on fire, Russell City. (Photo Courtesy of Maria Ochoa, via Medium.com)*



<sup>44</sup> Feb 5, 1957, Oakland Tribune

<sup>45</sup> San Francisco Report

<sup>46</sup> Oakland Tribune, 1964, 1965 & 1966; Daily Review 1966

## A Community Bulldozed and Sold for \$2.4 Million

Russell City was redesignated by the County for industrial use, resulting in the forced displacement of residents, the seizure of their land, and the destruction of the community. In 1963, the Russell City Redevelopment Agency was created to acquire the property. Within two years, all 205 families, 33 individuals, 13 businesses and 7 churches had been uprooted. By 1966, bulldozers had flattened the entire 200 acres, forcing the remaining residents to leave.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, in January 1968, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors accepted a \$2.4 million offer for the now-cleared acreage from industrial park developer, Cabot, Cabot and Forbes, incurring a \$400,000 loss to the county after the costs of land acquisition and resident relocation were accounted for. The area was subsequently annexed to the City of Hayward, which committed to install essential infrastructure and utilities to support redevelopment, now that the residents were gone. With the community demolished and the land cleared, the redevelopment plans were set in motion. The once-thriving neighborhood was erased, making way for industrial development.<sup>48</sup>

The residents of Russell City were not only displaced from their homes, but they also experienced the final indignity of having their land grossly undervalued. Based on an analysis prepared by the Ceres Policy Research Group and San Francisco State University for the City of Hayward, “the Santucci Hog Farm received the most compensation out of all the property owners in the Russell City Redevelopment Project Area. Santucci received \$510,000 for their parcels, which would be equivalent to \$2.4 million in today’s dollars”. This amount translates to \$255,000 per lot at that time. The total redevelopment budget for property acquisition was \$2,788,883. Out of 700 lots and 200 acres in total, Santucci owned 35 acres. The compensation

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<sup>47</sup> Oakland Tribune, January 1968

<sup>48</sup> Daily Review, 1968

**Uprooted and erased--  
205 families, 33  
individuals, 13  
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homes and properties  
as Russell City was  
bulldozed and sold for  
\$2.4 million**

Santucci received accounted for a majority of the budget. If Santucci received fair and just compensation, it can serve as a benchmark for the amount per lot for all families. Payment per owner was \$2,133.33. Some owners received considerably more, while some owners received as little as \$250.00. A per-lot calculation resulted in a cost per lot range of \$107.14 to \$4,750, with a median price paid per lot of \$1,356.83.”<sup>49</sup>

Ironically, much to the shock and dismay of the community, the County used a portion of the proceeds from the land sale to acquire the site of the Santa Rita Jail, purchasing land that was previously a federal military base, and now serves as the location of the Santa Rita Jail. (San Francisco Report; Oakland Tribune 4/23/1968).

Mrs. Henry, who testified at the hearings in 1963, was paid a mere \$2,700 for her \$7,500 investment. Mrs. Henry’s granddaughter, Marian Johnson, had this to say about the unjust seizure of her grandmother’s land: “The residents of Russell City were hard working, kind, humble, and loving individuals, and families. Though they were not paid a living wage, by their utter determination and commitment to themselves and their families, they were able to save up their money to purchase, at market value, homes, and land to build their homes to create their family legacy. Unbeknownst to these families, the systemic anti Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) politics actively activated actions and behaviors from agencies and individuals outside of their community being used against them to take away the land and homes they purchased. Due to those actions, the Russell City residents would be given no other option than to be paid a mere pittance in return to remove them from their land—they were given less than pennies on the dollar for their privately held land which they thought would be their forever homes only to see their land handed over to private investors and given to the City of Hayward as a gift.”<sup>50</sup>

60 years later, the dark legacy of the community’s forced displacement continues to have deep impacts on the families and their descendants. Notwithstanding the passage of time, the displacement and injustice they suffered continues to inflict trauma. Former residents and descendants are engaged in a struggle to reclaim their land and persist in seeking just and fair compensation for the harm perpetrated against them. Today, the area is part of Hayward’s Westside Industrial Zone, home to a variety of biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, logistics corporations and other thriving businesses. (Hayward Chamber of Commerce). This abuse of eminent domain for financial gains to the wealthy and those in power highlights the need for recognition and protection of marginalized communities’ rights, ensuring that residents have access to basic needs and are fairly compensated for any losses, regardless of skin color.

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<sup>49</sup> Reclaiming Russell City: A Comprehensive Approach to Reparative Justice and Community Renewal, Ceres Policy Research; Redeveloping Russell City: Alameda County and the City of Hayward, and Industrialization, May 15, 2023, June 12, 2023, University of San Francisco

<sup>50</sup> July 2024



*Aerial view of Hayward Industrial Park/Former Russell City, April 2024. (Photo Courtesy of NBC Bay Area)*



## **In Remembrance: “The City May Be Gone, but the Memories Live On”**

The struggle for restitution is not only about reclaiming the land and fair and equitable financial compensation for the victims, but also about acknowledging the erasure of the community’s history, culture and identity. Russell City’s former residents and their descendants seek recognition in the region’s narrative and strive to honor the memories of those who were displaced while working to preserve the stories and traditions that have been passed down through generations.

The city’s efforts to further erase the history and memories of Russell City continued in 1964 when the name of Russell Road was changed to Winton Avenue. This attempt to rewrite the past is a stark reminder of the systemic erasure of marginalized communities. The cumulative effect of these actions is a testament to the lack of worth placed on the those who once called Russell City home.

To continue honoring the legacy of Russell City, it is crucial to acknowledge the ongoing efforts to preserve its memory and culture, even as the city itself has been erased from the map. Since the early 1970’s, friends, families, former residents, neighbors and descendants have gathered annually on the first Sunday of September, Labor Day weekend, to share their achievements, struggles, wisdom, food, music, pictures and camaraderie at a picnic in Kennedy Park in Hayward. This tradition began thanks to former residents Billy Garron and Ruby Tolefree-Echols, who realized that they were only seeing their old friends at funerals.

Determined to change that, they reached out to other former residents and organized the first Russell City reunion. Initially, focusing on providing meals for the elderly, its popularity grew, and soon they were serving everyone. For 23 to 24 years, The Dukes Sportsmen Club from Oakland hosted the picnic.

Eventually the torch was passed to Juanita and Sam Nava and a dedicated group of volunteers.



*Russell City Picnic Founders/Coordinators: top left, Ruby Tolefree-Echols, RC picnic co-founder; top right, Billy Garron, RC picnic co-founder; center, Billy Garron with Sam Nava; left bottom, Juanita & Sam Nava, picnic coordinators; bottom right, Joe Green, organizer, volunteer chef extraordinaire.*

These reunions provide an opportunity for the community to reflect on the loss of their homes and envision the lives they might have led if the land had remained theirs. The gatherings embody their motto: “They City May Be Gone, But the Memories Live On”.

Through these reunions, they keep their history alive, ensuring that the memory of a community unjustly displaced is never forgotten. The former residents extend their heartfelt gratitude to those who have worked tirelessly, and with deep spiritual commitment, to sustain this event, which has played a vital role in the healing process for all of those who were forcibly removed from their beloved Russell City.<sup>51</sup>

The following photograph collages capture the joy and friendships on display in these cherished reunions.

<sup>51</sup> Oakland Tribune, 5/18/1980; Daily Review, 9/3/1996









RUSSELL CITY  
26<sup>TH</sup>  
REUNION









# The Apology: Reclaiming History through a Commitment to Memory and Justice

The campaign for restitution has sparked a wider conversation about the need for accountability and justice in the face of urban redevelopment and gentrification. The Russell City community’s fight serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and respecting the rights of marginalized communities. As the community continues to push for recognition and redress, their struggle serves as a beacon of hope for a more just and equitable future.

In November 2021, more than 60 years since the destruction of Russell City, the City of [Hayward](#) issued a formal apology, recognizing its role in the forced displacement of the people of Russell City. “The intent of the Resolution is not to absolve but rather to formally acknowledge the existence of institutionalized racial bias and racism and the historical role municipal government has played in its creation and legacy of inequities and racially disparate impacts.” This apology marks a significant step towards reconciliation for the affected residents and their descendants. The enduring spirit of Russell City continues to inspire current social justice movements, reflecting the community’s historical struggle against systemic inequities.



The Press Release of the City of Hayward’s formal apology to Russell City Residents. (Photo Courtesy of the City of Hayward)



## Russell City Art Project

### A Tribute in Heritage Plaza

In 1966 the Local Agency Foundation advocated for a \$600 monument to recognize the often-overlooked historic aspects of Russell City. John McKay, executive officer of the commission, said: “members felt that since the area will be completely razed for the county’s redevelopment project, it would be appropriate that the historic aspects be recognized.”<sup>52</sup> But no such monument was constructed.

In July 2021, the City of Hayward opened Heritage Plaza in downtown Hayward. The Plaza is home to interpretative signs and art pieces that commemorate the diverse experiences and cultures of Hayward’s rich history. The Russell City Art Committee was formed in March 2021 to design and create a plaque that informs the public of the history and legacy of Russell City, recognizing the struggles of the former residents. Three art pieces will be displayed in Heritage Plaza honoring the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, the Japanese American community and Russell City. [\(Link\)](#)

In addition, the Arts Committee is designing an iconic “Archway” to be installed on Winton Avenue (formerly Russell Road), paying tribute to the historic entrance to Russell City. The visual gateway will prominently display the names of former families etched into its design. By honoring Russell City’s legacy, this landmark will permanently recognize the area’s rich history and cultural significance. The project, which is in the planning phase, is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

## Russell City Reparative Justice Project

The Russell City Reparative Justice Project (RCRJP), initiated in 2022, is the City of Hayward’s response to a recommendation from its Community Services Commission which called for the City to work with former residents and descendants to “determine appropriate restitution for the City of Hayward’s involvement in inequitable treatment, the capturing of property and land without due compensation and the forced relocation of Russell City Community members.” The City of Hayward contracted with San Francisco State University and Ceres Policy Research to assist the RCRJP to determine appropriate restitution. [\(Link\)](#)

On March 26, 2024, the Hayward City Council held a “Work Session” which was the last phase of the community-led component of the RCRJP. The process gathered over 350 responses from former residents and descendants about their lived experiences in Russell City. The ongoing legacy drives efforts to address racial and economic injustices, with descendants of Russell City actively engaged in shaping policies to heal and correct these long-standing issues. [\(Link\)](#)

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<sup>52</sup> Oakland Tribune, 1966

The City of Hayward hosted a 5-part town hall series between July and September 2024 to receive community input on the 10 implementation proposals which will be submitted for the Hayward City Council to make determinations.

[RUSSELL CITY REPARATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT TOWN HALL #1: JULY 24, 2024](#)

[RUSSELL CITY REPARATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT TOWN HALL #2: JULY 31, 2024](#)

[RUSSELL CITY REPARATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT TOWN HALL #3: AUGUST 21, 2024](#)

[RUSSELL CITY REPARATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT TOWN HALL #4: AUGUST 28, 2024](#)

[RUSSELL CITY REPARATIVE JUSTICE PROJECT TOWN HALL #5: SEPTEMBER 25, 2024](#)

## **For More Information & Reminders:**

[Join the Russell City Reparative Justice Project Email List.](#)

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## Cover Page Photographs

- ▶ Left side:
  - top left: Andrew Johnson’s General Store, 1908.
  - center left: Fire Truck with volunteer firefighters.
  - bottom left: Field Trip, Ms. Eva White’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade class standing on the steps of the Alameda County Court House in Oakland, January 20, 1950.
  
- ▶ Center:
  - top center: Russell City Picnic Banner.
  - middle center: Musicians playing at Nightclub in Russell City; Big Mama Thorton on drums, Billy Dunn on guitar, Jimmy Mamu on keyboard.
  
- ▶ Right side
  - top right: Russell City Elementary School.
  - middle right: Free X-ray truck in front of Russell Market, Russell Road.
  - bottom right: Russell City Student field trip to Leslie Salt plant and water tower in 1949.