

March 1944

THE EVOLUTION OF SUGAR HILL

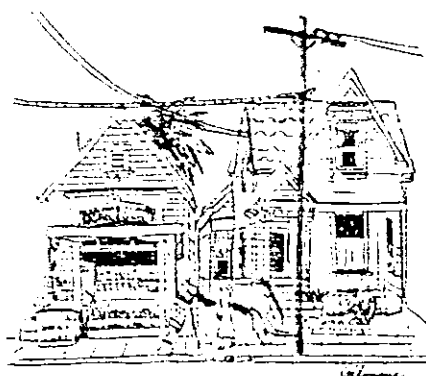
NOWADAYS one scarcely notices the high stone gates which mark the entrances to Hobart, Harvard, and Oxford streets, south of Washington Boulevard. For one thing, the traffic is too heavy, too swift; and then, again, the gates have been obscured by the intrusion of shops and stores. At the base of the stone pillars appears the inscription "West Adams Heights." There was a time when these entranceways were formidable and haughty, for they marked the ways to one of the first elite residential areas in Los Angeles. It is quite apparent, even now, however, that West Adams Heights was carefully planned, soundly conceived. Turning south into Hobart, one sees wide contoured streets, large lots, spacious lawns and gardens, high palms along Harvard, and old-fashioned lamps hanging from crossbars on tall posts. In the unplanned early-day chaos of Los Angeles, West Adams Heights was obviously something very special, an island in an ocean of bungalows—approachable, but withdrawn and exclusive—one of the few surviving examples of planned urban elegance of the turn of the century.

IN THE infancy of Los Angeles, the socially elite, like their counterparts the world over, sought out the Heights, specifically the old Fort Hill section, from which they could look down upon the sprawling pueblo. Then, around 1880, they began to lay out estates along West Adams in the area between Main and Hoover Streets. In those days, of course, the city ceased to exist beyond Washington Boulevard, and the new West Adams district had a remote, suburban, country-like quality about it. Somewhat later, Chester Place, a street two blocks long in a twenty-acre residential park, was laid out and developed by Edward L. Doheny as the inner bastion which securely anchored the splendor of West Adams. Since the movement of the socially elite was toward the west, it was, of course, inevitable that "the Heights" near what is now Western Avenue would eventually catch their fancy.

In the latter part of the 1880's, a new wave of enterprising, well-to-do settlers came to Los Angeles, including some of the individuals who were to plan and develop West Adams Heights. George I. Cochran arrived in 1888; Frederick Hastings Rindge in 1887; M. H. Sherman in 1889; Dr. John R. Haynes in 1887. It was the Canadian-

born Cochran who first saw the possibilities of "the Heights"; in fact, the subdivision is referred to in the early chronicles as his personal promotion. Back in 1876, one Mary E. Hall had acquired a patent from the government to a tract of 160 acres, which included the Heights, and it was from Mrs. William Moore, the former Mary Hall, that Cochran and his associates derived title to the lands which in 1902 became West Adams Heights. The original subdivision included an area bounded by Western and Normandie, Adams and Washington, but it was always intended that "the Heights" should be set apart for the elite, for here the map called for seventy-five-foot streets and lots measuring 75 by 160 feet.

The planners knew what they were about when they reserved the Heights for the elite—a small portion of the original tract bounded on the east by La Salle, on the west by Western Avenue, to the north by Washington, and to the south by Twenty-fifth Street. "Heights" is, of course, rather euphemistic, for the ascent is barely perceptible. La Salle, which bounds "the Heights" on the east, is only forty or fifty feet below the level of Harvard, and Twenty-fifth Street is only slightly higher than Adams; but the eminence, slight as it may appear to an engineer, is extremely significant to the sociologist. For it was the elevation of the Heights, however slight, that protected it against changing fashions in residential districts. Whether it was the social eminence of the first dwellers or the tall mansions they built, "the Heights" seemed to be loftier than the scale indicated on a map. To this day, if one lives in one of the single-storied, flat-roofed cottages east of La Salle, he is forced to "look up" to the tall stately mansions on the Heights. While it is quite apparent that those who built these mansions wanted to emphasize their social status, it is equally apparent that they were gracious people



who did not want to "turn their backs" on the lowly cottage-dwellers east of La Salle. So they took care that the mansions on the deep lots which extend from Harvard to La Salle should really face in two directions. The main entrances, of course, are on Harvard, facing west; but the rear portions of the lots, sloping gently down to a cobblestone retaining wall which runs along the west side of La Salle, have lawns and gardens and arbors and are not, in the usual sense, "backyards." The cobblestone retaining wall is just high enough to protect the Heights against encroachment from the east.

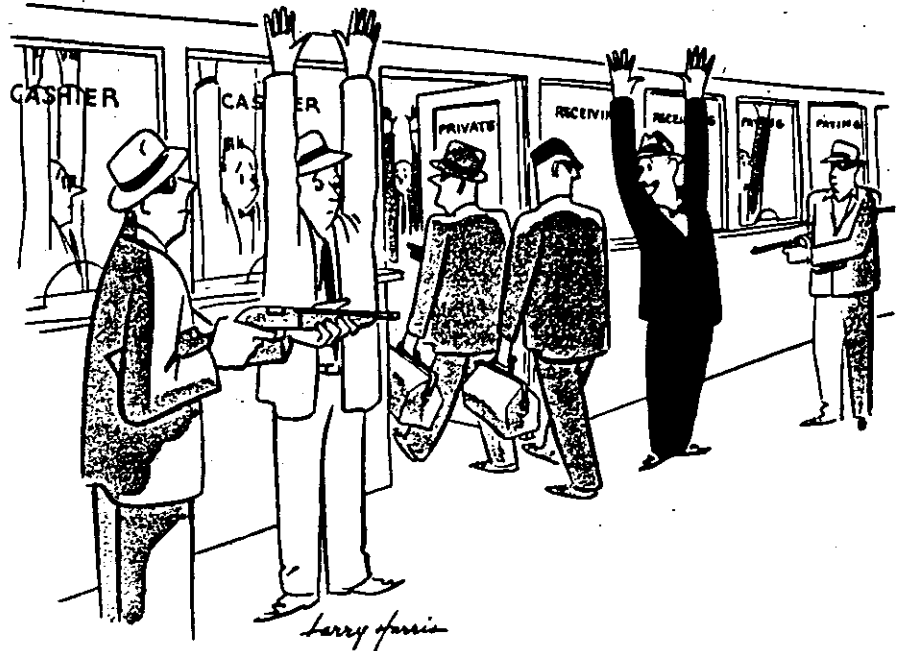
The north flank of the Heights has always been guarded by Washington Boulevard. Boulevards of this size are inevitably barriers; like rivers, they separate those who live on the opposite banks. The south flank is protected by Adams, another boulevard, and also by the circumstance that Twenty-fifth Street is somewhat higher than Adams. Thus those who live beyond Adams, to the south, are also forced to "look up" to the Heights. To the west is another boulevard, Western Avenue, and, on the opposite side of Western is Berkeley Square, a real ghetto of the rich and well-born, running from Twenty-first to Twenty-second Streets and bounded by Gramercy and Western. Stone gateways, arched and massive, with chains across the entrance, guard Berkeley Square, which, like Chester Place, was designed as an inner fortress to hold the line against the invading forces of mediocrity. In this degenerate age, some urchin has chalked the damning epithet "Snob" at the base of the arched gates. As tides of new residents swept into Los Angeles after 1902, they swiftly surrounded but never scaled "the Heights."

Among the incorporators of the West Adams Heights Association, formed in 1901, were such well-known Southern Californians as Frederick Hastings Rindge, Henry E. Huntington, Hulet C. Merritt, Dr. John R. Haynes, M. H. Sherman, A. J. Wallace, Lee Phillips, and, of course, George I. Cochran. Most of these men were identified in one capacity or another with The Conservative Life Insurance Company which Mr. Rindge had formed on coming to Los Angeles (it was later merged, in 1906, with the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company, still another "California" company). In fact the first mansions built in the Heights were those of Frederick Hastings Rindge, W. S. Tup-

per, and George I. Cochran, the president, first vice-president, and second vice-president, respectively, of The Conservative Life. For many years, photographs of the Cochran and Rindge mansions appeared in every Los Angeles tourist guide. In the early photographs, these houses loom like stately castles on a hill, for there were then no other homes in the surrounding area. No tour of Los Angeles was complete then that did not include at least a passing glimpse of these two famous show places on the Heights. Somewhat later, the names of the home-owners in West Adams Heights read like a *Who's Who* of Los Angeles.

Today, of course, the Heights is largely occupied by Negroes and is known far and wide as the famous Sugar Hill section of Los Angeles, the most elite Negro residential area in the United States, enjoying, by common consensus of Negro opinion, a clear pre-eminence over Washington's smart Le Droit Park section, St. Louis's Enright Street, the swanky Negro area of West Philadelphia, the few select blocks on Chicago's Westchester, and Harlem's fabulous Sugar Hill that sweeps north from the blue steeple of Saint James's Presbyterian Church to the Polo Grounds. But, although the occupancy has changed, the Heights still preserves its very special quality; if anything, its elegance has been refurbished, not dimmed, by the influx of Negroes. Long before the Negro "invasion" began, however, the Heights had experienced a curious inner collapse, a psychological defeat, a social deflation which made the change in occupancy possible.

WEST ADAMS HEIGHTS is still a hill of ironies—subtle, amusing, insinuating. Cruising through the streets at night, one is nowadays impressed by the distinctive "personalities" which these large mansions seem to exhibit. They are somehow like people: individual, disparate, each with its particular angularity, its minor eccentricities, its peculiar expression. For these are very expressive homes. Each, in its own way, with its special accent, seems to be trying to say something. One has the feeling that these homes carry on elaborate nocturnal conversations, gossiping about all that they have seen, about their various occupants, and about all that has happened through the years. It is, perhaps, the spacing, the wide lawns, the deep set-backs which give these homes their extraordinary expressiveness. The homes of the elite in the newer and



"Psst! Keep your eyes peeled for a promissory note signed 'J. A. Poole!'"

more fashionable quarters may be more costly and elegant but, somehow, they don't seem to have very much to say. They are too compact, too precise, and the emphasis on functionalism seems to have rubbed out the idiosyncratic detail, the quirk of sentiment, the extravagant flourish. In fact the homes in these newer districts conceal far more than they express, whereas these old mansions along Hobart and Harvard and Oxford are by turns talkative and full of somber reticences. More than anything else, however, it is the all-pervading irony of the Heights which conveys this astonishing impression that the homes could, if they would, tell wonderful stories.

On the rounded corner lot which extends from Harvard to Hobart on Twenty-fifth Street is a large, sadly deteriorated mansion. Strolling through the district in the daytime, I scarcely noticed it; but, the first time I saw it at night, I was immediately impressed by the bulky shadows, the old carriage house, the once-fashionable drive-around, and the twin medieval turrets on the roof. This was the town house of Frederick Hastings Rindge, once known as the wealthiest man in Southern California, owner of the famous Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit with its twenty-five miles of ocean front. A Harvard man, Rindge was one of the few early-day Southern California tycoons who was something of a *litterateur*, a man who combined with Methodist piety a love of the ornate and elegant. In 1898 he published a little book, *Happy Days in Southern California*, which, despite its mannered

prose, conveys a real "feel" for the peculiar seasons, landscape, and beauty of Southern California. An early biographical note reveals that, although Mr. Rindge had a ranch house on his Malibu estate and a beach home in Santa Monica, he lived in West Adams Heights "in a manner befitting his station in social and financial circles." The huge contours of Castle Rindge define this "station" most eloquently.

At about the time the first Negro purchased a home in the Heights, Castle Rindge was sold, for a ridiculous sum, to the Catholic Church. For a time it was used as a home for transient girls but is now a hostel for expectant mothers, some married and some less fortunate. Until her death on February 8, 1941, however, the old mansion had been occupied by May K. Rindge, who, for so many years, had fought to retain possession of the Malibu estate. The old mansion seems to have accepted its present occupants with good grace for it still has a most inviting air about it, as though it were grateful that the advent of the wreckers had been deferred. In this mansion, more than in any other in the tract, one can recapture something of the atmosphere of a long-ago and far-away chapter in the social history of Los Angeles.

If the exterior of this once-famous showplace is nowadays somewhat unkempt and ragged, the interior still retains its former elegance. There are small intimate parlors at each wing, with specially cut curving glass set with lead in the high, rounded window

frames. The north parlor, in bird's-eye maple, with frescoes around the walls, has a charming fireplace of soft, cream-colored marble. The south parlor is in green and has, too, its fireplace and elegant mantelpiece, over which appears the legend: "He Aims Too Low Who Aims Below the Sky." Nowadays this parlor is used as a chapel, and pictures of the gentle Jesus, in pale colors, have been placed, here and there, on the walls. The elegant effect which the parlor was so obviously intended to produce contrasts rather startlingly with the hushed, chill atmosphere which has come with the pictures of Jesus, the drawn blinds, the chapel furnishings, and the improvised altar near the rounded windows. A huge living room, with vast vaulted ceiling, is dominated by an enormous fireplace of imported red Italian marble (there are thirteen fireplaces, all of Italian marble, in Castle Rindge). Over this fireplace, in a lettering large and emphatic, like the signature of a rather breezy open-handed millionaire, appears the legend: "California Shall Be Ours as Long as the Stars Remain." This same legend is attached to the old silk flag of the California Republic which is preserved in the museum of the Pioneers' Society in San Francisco; it must have had some special significance for Rindge because he repeats it in his book. Off the living room is a large dining room with indented window seats, huge windows, and, like the living room, a fantastically large pendant chandelier. Off the living room, also, is a small intimate study with a green marble fireplace, frescoed walls, domed ceiling, and rich wood

paneling. Here another legend reads: "The Love of Learning, the Sequestered Nooks, and all the Sweet Eternity of Books." Today, of course, the floor is bare, the fireplace has known no warmth for many years, and the built-in bookcases yawn with a great emptiness. A great ornate staircase, leading to the upper floor, has a carved railing made from a single, massive oak slab. Throughout the house, the wood paneling, the floors, and the great thick doors have a richness of texture and reflect a workmanship that belongs to a forgotten past.

In the one bedroom I was permitted to inspect—the curiously assorted guests were not expecting a visitor—appears the legend:

Palaces are Dreary Domes,
Fair Domains but deserts wild,
If there be not happy homes,
Gentle thoughts and manners mild.
Trust him though his lot be small
And he make but slight pretense—
He who lives at peace with all,
Dwells in True Magnificence.

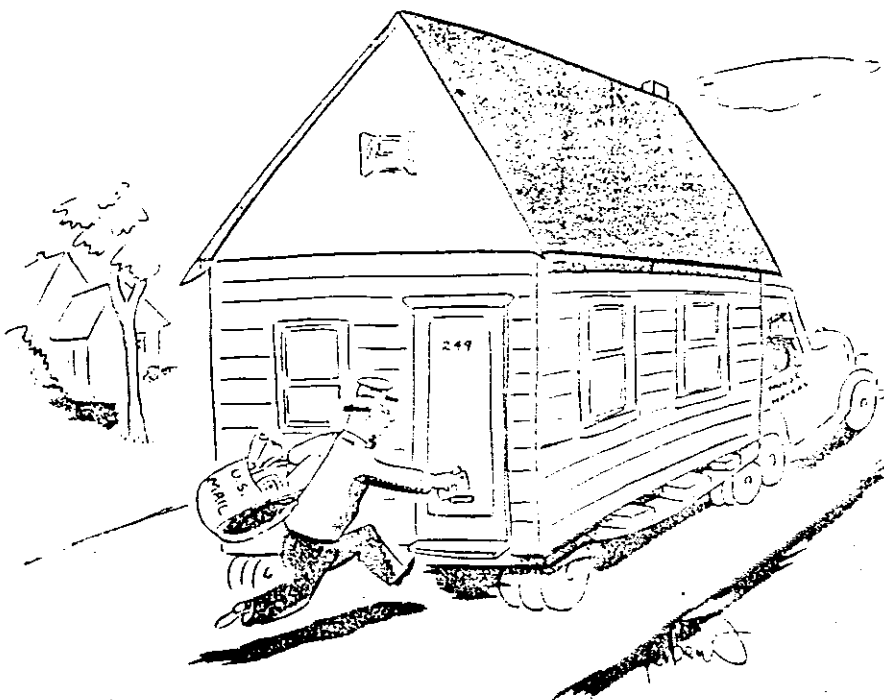
Having in mind the present use to which the old mansion is dedicated, this legend might well be regarded as an amazingly farsighted intuition on the part of Frederick Hastings Rindge. In the large upstairs hallway, still another legend, again not altogether inappropriate, appears:

Who Shuns the Dust and Sweat
of the Contest,
On His Brow Falls Not the Cool
Shade of the Olive.

Throughout the upper floor, one notices numerous old-fashioned "speaking tubes," bell cords, and dumb waiters. On the chatelaine worn by the present and most amiable house-mother is a weighty collection of specially made bronze keys for the countless doors and locks of Castle Rindge. The carriage house in the yard is lined with handsome wood-paneling and the roof is supported by heavy, carved beams. In the yard, also, is a conservatory facing a courtyard where three to four hundred guests could sit of an evening, under the portico, listening to music. The yard is sadly neglected but lilies and narcissus "keep coming up," as the house-mother explains, and their haunting fragrance seems to come to one across the deep well of the years.

All in all, Castle Rindge functions very efficiently as a hostel. It is spacious and roomy; the grounds are extensive, with walks and benches; and the austere castle-like exterior makes for an atmosphere of inaccessibility well adapted to its present use. One leaves the place with the feeling that its spirit is aptly defined in the florid legend: "California Shall Be Ours as Long as the Stars Remain." Obviously Frederick Hastings Rindge wanted this mansion to suggest a permanence-of-possession, an ownership projected in time, a deeply rooted identification with California. But Castle Rindge, which once offered prodigal hospitality to its guests, now furnishes shelter for the indigent; once a show-place, it is now a hostel. In the long, cool pantry where champagne bottles were once uncorked, ladies in maternity garments shuffle about preparing lunch. The stars still remain and who owns California now?

OF A SUNDAY afternoon nowadays caravans of sleek Cadillacs and Buicks invade the heights, bringing the elite of the Negro community, "dressed down to the bricks," to smartly appointed teas, musicales, and receptions. Saved from the wreckers by the influx of the Negro elite, the old homes are still popular snowplaces, for Sugar Hill is as famous in its way as the "West Adams Heights" of former years. It is ironic that many of the early residents of the district were connected with The Conservative Life Insurance Company. For today the proud and sturdy steel girders of a new skyscraper pierce the skies at the corner of Adams and Western from the roof of which one will be able to "look down on" West Adams Heights. The skyscraper will be the



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future home of the Golden State Life Insurance Company, another "local" insurance company, the largest Negro-owned insurance company in Western America. The president of this company, Norman Houston, was the first Negro to purchase a home in the Heights. Like George I. Cochran and John Newton Russell, like Frederick Hastings Rindge and W. S. Tupper, Houston founded an insurance company and, like them, he is one of the "builders" of Los Angeles. But this is getting a bit ahead of the story. . . .

For at least a decade before Mr. Houston purchased a home in the Heights, the tightly knit, prestige-conscious community had begun to show signs of social disintegration. Outwardly it looked the same, but, by some mysterious process of attrition, it had lost its old *elan*, its spirit, its will-to-resist. As one by one the old residents began to pass away, the sons and daughters sold out and moved to the west—to Brentwood, Bel-Air, and Beverly Hills; and, since most of these changes took place during the dolorous 'thirties, the new owners who moved in did not measure up, by the arbitrary canons of Society, to those whose homes they had purchased. Among these new residents were a Korean merchant, a Chinese character actor, two Italian-American families, a Hungarian-American, and several Armenian-American families. The remaining old residents of high social prestige tolerated but never really accepted these newcomers; socially they never became part of the Heights. Thus the first cleavage, the first fissure developed.

Then, too, the depression divided the old residents into two groups: those who had managed to retain their wealth but, for one reason or another, did not care to move into more fashionable districts; and those who, hard-hit by the depression, could neither afford to move nor to maintain fifteen- and twenty-room mansions. About the only visible evidence of these changes, however, was the appearance in 1941 of the new Armenian Gethsemane Congregational Church at the corner of Hobart and Oxford. Nevertheless the old community on the Heights had lost some measure of its former social energy; its pulse had weakened. Quarrels began to develop between old residents and newcomers; in some cases, even between old-resident families. Less than complete unanimity prevailed at the infrequent meetings of the West Adams Heights Improvement Association, and a marked falling off of social activity was noted. As an omen of social defeat, one

of the old residents walked into his garden on a bright Sunday morning and shot himself. Other suicides were reported in the 'thirties. The best known resident, residing in the largest mansion, filed a petition in bankruptcy in 1940. Obviously the solidarity of the Heights was being undermined.

From the outset, of course, the Heights had been restricted to occupants of the Caucasian race but, by some curious fluke, one property had never been restricted. It was this mansion that Norman Houston purchased in 1938. Some years before, it had been sold by an old resident to a newcomer. Unable to maintain the place as a residence, the new owner had tried to operate a clandestine "guest home" but the neighbors had objected since the Heights was not zoned for this purpose. Then, for a brief period, the house had been used seasonally as a private club where professional football players were lodged during the season; being rented at other times as a meeting place to various organizations. This use had also aroused the ire of the neighbors. As a matter of harsh fact, "guest homes" were being surreptitiously operated throughout the tract by some of the economically hard-pressed old residents; but, in these cases, the remaining old residents had merely looked the other way. However, a private club for professional football players—never noted for quiet manners and decorous behavior—was a bit too much. There was a rumor, also, that the property was being used for a purpose symbolized by a red light which actually appeared over the main entrance. The rumor was false, the red light was innocent, but it served to crystallize sentiment against the owner. Hedged in by unfriendly neighbors, unable to rent rooms, unable to develop an adequate income, this owner finally decided to settle scores with her oppressors by selling to a Negro. As the first Negro to purchase a home in the Heights, Mr. Houston was a little hesitant about moving in and, for a year or more, rented the place to a white tenant.

Once word had traveled around the district that a Negro had purchased a home in the Heights, a hurried meeting was called of the Improvement Association. It was then discovered that most of the restrictions had expired or were about to expire. This information seemed to be a matter of much graver concern to the new residents who had purchased homes in the tract to acquire prestige than to the old residents who had always had prestige. Mr. Cochran, for example, wanted very much to sell his

mansion to a Negro but was unable to find a purchaser. Nevertheless, a petition was drafted, asking property owners to consent to the imposition of new restrictions designed to protect the Heights against non-Caucasians until midnight on December 31 in the fantastically remote year of 2035. But the cleavages which had by then developed made joint action impossible; the capacity to cooperate had vanished with the socially homogeneous character of the district. A substantial minority of owners refused to sign the petition, some (a



very few) as a matter of principle, others out of sheer stubbornness, some because they privately intended to sell to Negroes, and others out of a general indifference to the entire hubbub. By and large, the old residents refused to sign, and this, of course, infuriated the newcomers, thereby aggravating the tensions.

It was finally agreed that the president of the Improvement Association would seek out Mr. Houston and suggest that he might, perhaps, be "happier" in some other area. An extremely amiable man, Mr. Houston actually gave the Improvement Association an option to purchase the property; but the members could not then agree as to the amounts each should contribute toward the purchase price, and so the option expired. During all this time, a twenty-four-hour surveillance was maintained to detect the first signs that Mr. Houston intended to occupy the property. If one of Orson Welles' copper-headed Martians had been about to invade the Heights, rather than a cultured, well-bred Native Son, a graduate of the University of California, and a most successful business executive and civic leader, the anxiety could not have been greater.

When Mr. Houston finally decided to move in, the Improvement Association held an emergency meeting on December 5, 1940. At this meeting a resolution was adopted which recited that "whereas it is thoroughly established that the presence of Negro residents invariably causes a recession in property values," and not because of any objection to Mr. Houston personally, and surely not from any animosity toward Negroes generally, therefore the residents resolved to take legal action to protect the exclusive character of the Heights which, of course, had already lost its exclusive character. Mr. Houston had been smuggled into an earlier meeting of the Association at

which, seated behind a row of potted palms, he had heard the members debate the effect of Negro occupancy with more force than sociological insight.

In the meantime, the more hard-pressed of the owners decided that it would be a good idea to induce the city to re-zone the Heights so as to make it possible to secure adequate rentals. The City Council then approved but Mayor Bowron vetoed an ordinance re-zoning the area, the veto being in response to the protests of those residents who objected to any change in

the character of the neighborhood. Here, again, the cleavages which had developed made joint action impossible; the divergence of interests could not be reconciled. Noting this impasse, some of the owners began to negotiate, often surreptitiously, with Negro purchasers. It is therefore quite inaccurate to say that Negroes "invaded" the Heights: actually they were invited, if somewhat left-handedly, to bail out a set of economically hard-pressed property owners. But once a number of Negroes had moved into the district, the City Council quickly passed an ordinance re-zoning the area, over the Mayor's veto and despite the vehement protests of the Negro owners; the ordinance was precisely the same as the one which had been shelved, some time previously.

AS ONE property after another was sold to Negroes, the diehards in the district finally decided to bring a court action. By the time this action came to trial before Judge Thurmond Clarke on December 6, 1945, a number of Negroes were occupying homes in the Heights. Actually their purchases represented not a planned invasion, but the end-product of a more or less inevitable process of ecological succession. Unable to agree among themselves, lacking any real social unity, the "white" owners had failed to bring about the re-zoning which alone would have made it possible for them, as a group, to survive as mansion-owners. The new "white" middle class of Los Angeles was not interested in buying fifteen- and twenty-room mansions in an "old" residential district which had long since been by-passed by the smart set. In the meantime, the Negro population had grown from 60,000 in 1938 to around 130,000 (1945) and almost as many Negroes were living in the "green lawn" West Jefferson area as

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were living in the submerged precincts of Central Avenue. Being desperately in need of homes, the Negro middle class was quite willing to pay fancy prices for old, run-down mansions; in effect, they were the only possible purchasers for these mansions.

Judge Clarke's courtroom on the morning of December 6 had about it something of the atmosphere of a gala social occasion, for among the defendants who there assembled were some of the brightest social lights in the Negro community. Conscious of the occasion, the wives appeared in all their finery and elegance, and the atmosphere was such as to make one wonder if the Judge would pour tea during the afternoon recess. Among the defendants were Hattie McDaniels, winner of an Academy Award and owner of the old Hamilton Cotton mansion; the J. A. Somervilles; Lieutenant Leslie N. King, U. S. A. (retired); Dr. William E. Bailey; Dr. Thomas R. Peyton; Louise Beavers; and Truman R. Lott, who had alleged in his answer that the plaintiffs were seeking to enforce an agreement of the kind advocated by one Adolph Hitler in a book called *Mein Kampf*.

It would have been possible, of course, for Judge Clarke to have by-passed the main issue by simply finding that the "character of the occupancy" had changed and therefore that it would be "inequitable" to enforce the restrictions. Judge Clarke, however, decided to make judicial history and, incidentally, to anticipate the thinking of the Justices of the United States Supreme Court, by holding that the restrictions violated the Fourteenth Amendment—the first ruling of this kind to be made by an American judge. As a youngster, Judge Clarke had pedaled out to the Heights on his bicycle on many occasions to visit school friends and he knew something about the history of these homes and their former occupants. During the trial, he made a personal inspection of the tract and was doubtless impressed by the obvious fact that no deterioration had taken place with the influx of Negro owners. Loren Miller, who represented the defendants, was later to argue and win the precedent-shattering restrictive covenant case of *Shelley vs. Kraemer* before the Supreme Court. Not only did Judge Clarke's ruling anticipate this decision of the Supreme Court, but, in the years intervening between the two decisions, more suits were filed by Negroes in Los Angeles contesting the validity of restrictive covenants than were filed by Negroes in the rest of the USA. Los Angeles was,



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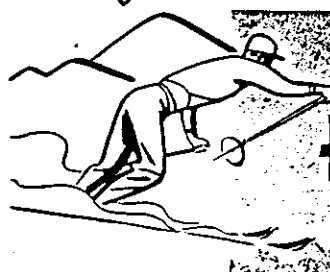
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therefore, the proving ground on which the theories were worked out, the arguments tested, and the legal ammunition accumulated which were later to induce the Supreme Court, in *Shelley vs. Kraemer*, to hold that restrictive covenants could no longer be enforced anywhere in the United States.

Following Judge Clarke's ruling, the character of the occupancy of the Heights was rapidly transformed. One after another, the diehards began to sell to Negroes so that today the district is about 60 per cent Negro-occupied. Here another irony must be noted. When Negroes first began to buy homes in the Heights, property values were depressed. This had nothing to do with Negro purchases, since the values had been depressed for a decade before a single sale had been made to a Negro. Actually the prices which Negroes paid were well above the market price. But, after the Negroes moved in, the demand for housing became more acute and property values began to rise. Homes purchased for \$15,000 in 1943 were easily worth \$40,000 in 1948. The Negro purchasers were, of course, the beneficiaries of this rise in values. However, a survey indicates that Negro purchasers have, on the average, spent between \$5,000 and \$7,000 in improving and remodeling these old homes, which are in better repair today than at any time in the last twenty years. On Hobart Boulevard, a Negro purchaser is today building a \$50,000 house, and other new homes will soon be constructed by Negroes. One white property owner who had taken a dim view of the effect of Negro occupancy told me that he was so encouraged by the improvement which had taken place in the district that he had decided to invest some money improving his own property. Today the Heights has taken a new lease on life: the lawns are immaculate; the hedges are carefully trimmed; and the old mansions, repainted, remodeled, and redecorated, have been brought to life by the energies and wealth of a self-confident, rising Negro middle class.

Generally, the few remaining "old residents" have come to accept the new dispensation with grace and philosophic detachment, but there were, of course, some "incidents" at the outset. When Allen Woodard III, an enterprising Negro realtor and civic leader, sought to obtain the use of the Armenian Gethsemane Congregational Church for a concert which the Negro residents were sponsoring for a charity, his request was tartly refused. There is a certain

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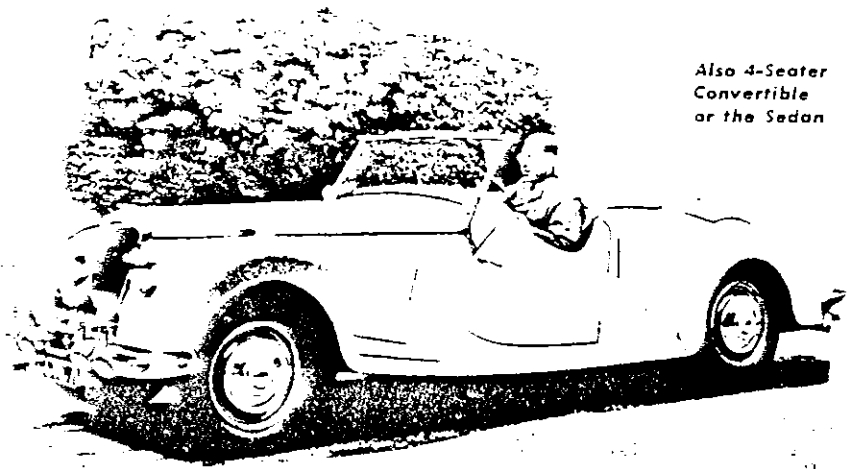
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irony to be noted here, too, for the church is made up of Armenian-American immigrants, whereas most of the Negro residents can properly claim that they are "old time" Americans. The refusal was made quite pointed by the pastor's comment that the church had purchased a site in the Heights in order "to get away from" Negroes who had moved into the area in which it was formerly located. The concert was held, however, in the building which houses the Los Angeles District of the California Federation of Women's Clubs at 2103 S. Hobart—perhaps the first use of this building for a Negro gathering. The clubhouse, incidentally, was the scene of an extraordinary costume party which some of the old residents organized when it had become apparent that Negroes could no longer be kept out of the Heights. Most of the guests came to the party in blackface, rigged out in "Negro" costumes as cotton pickers, minstrels, Negro "mammies," and so forth, and the party was reported, with photographs, in the local society pages. With the exception of a few "incidents" of this sort, however, neighborly relations have prevailed in the Heights between Negroes and whites.

Since the Supreme Court decided *Shelley vs. Kraemer* in May, 1948, a score or more Negroes have purchased homes in Los Angeles in areas of nearly exclusive white occupancy. In a report issued on December 31, the Anti-Defamation League has described some of the "incidents" which these purchases have provoked, including cross burnings, minor acts of vandalism, poison-pen letters, anonymous threats, and similar antics. Most of these incidents have been reported in suburban areas having a strong "Dixie" coloration; in old, rather run-down middle class districts; and in areas largely occupied by a bumpkinous, self-assertive, socially ambitious white middle class. It has been in the latter areas that the stoutest resistances have been encountered. By comparison, the resistance in West Adams Heights was strictly nominal—a semi-urbane, not-too-vehement protest.

One of the early Negro residents was Dr. J. A. Somerville, the son of an Anglican vicar who was, also, the headmaster of a church school in Jamaica, where Dr. Somerville was born. As a youngster, Dr. Somerville attended his father's school along with the children of the British governor of the islands. Brought up in this congenial atmosphere, he was wholly unfamiliar with color

prejudice. As a young man, he decided to seek his fortune in the United States, much against the wishes and admonitions of his father; and so, some forty-two years ago, he landed in San Francisco only to discover, on the day of his arrival, that he could not buy a meal in any good restaurant. Too proud to return to Jamaica, he determined to surmount the color bar at whatever pain and cost. Working for a time as a "houseboy" in a home in Redlands, he was the first Negro to be admitted to the School of Dentistry at the University of Southern California. When he first sought admission to the University, his application had been rejected but, since he was then a British subject, the British Consul reminded the University officials that His Majesty's subjects were not to be treated in this manner and called their attention to certain provisions in a treaty between Great Britain and the United States.

As a student at the University, Dr. Somerville liked to visit the Heights on Sundays and holidays to gaze at the fine homes and the beautiful lawns, and to watch the "white folks" come and go on their endless round of teas and social activities. Among the homes which he then admired was the beautiful residence at 2104 S. Harvard, which he now owns and occupies. In all his fondest imaginings, he never dreamed that he would one day own a home in the Heights. His wife, Dr. Vada Somerville, was the second Negro to graduate from the School of Dentistry at USC, and it was doubtless the courage and persistence of her future husband, in breaking the University's color bar, that made it possible for her to be admitted. When Dr. Somerville first came to Los Angeles, the city's entire population was a scant 150,000 and, for many years, he and Mrs. Somerville knew by name every Negro in the city. Today, of course, there are approximately as many Negro residents as there were then residents of all shades and colors.

Among his many interests and activities, Dr. Somerville is an indefatigable amateur gardener and the lovely garden in his home reminds him of the beauty and color and fragrance of his native Jamaica. A great friend and admirer of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Somerville organized and for many years was the moving spirit in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. At odd moments in a busy and useful life, he is working on an autobiography which he





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proposes to call *The Man of Color*. Since his whole life has been a succession of ironies, Dr. Somerville has a sardonic appreciation of the strange working out of the web of circumstance which finds him today the owner of one of the showplaces that he admired as a young University student in Los Angeles.

ONE BY ONE the old precincts of the socially elite are vanishing in Los Angeles. In Chester Place, the mansions are coming down rapidly, making way for parking lots and institutional structures. Nearby, the twenty-seven-room Frank Sabichi mansion has been dismantled by a horde of callous wreckers, armed with ingenious dismantling contrivances, which made a havoc of vaulted ceilings, the ornate frescoed walls, and elegant figurines of another day. The old red stone mansion built by Thomas Douglas Stimson, with its fortress-like turrets, is now being converted into a convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Berkeley Square is still intact, but the fingers of an encompassing pincers movement have nearly surrounded it, with sizable numbers of Negroes occupying areas to the east, south, and north. It is destined to be the next social bastion to capitulate, as socially ambitious Negroes have already begun to cast envious eyes at the old homes behind the Square's carefully guarded gates.

With West Adams Heights, of course, the problem is: how long can it survive as the Sugar Hill of the Negro community? Already one can see the intrusion of disruptive influences, notably along Western Avenue between Washington and Adams. Here one may note the offices of Dr. Paul J. Dorosh, D.C., Ph.C., specializing in Diet, with a large neon sign which pulses the words "Fear . . . Heart . . . Nerves" at the swiftly moving traffic on Western—words which, indeed, reflect the tempo of that traffic. Then, also, one notes the Moderne Motel, slick, glossy, sophisticated. Rest homes for the aged have also begun to invade this area, with their long, sad, telltale, sloping ramps. Further along is an old brown-shingled residence which today houses the Temple of the Masters where devotees of Hermetical Spiritual Science foregather, refugees, these too, from "fear, heart, nerves." Across the street, an old mansion has been converted into a retreat for the Brothers of St. John of God. But, although the edges of the district have obviously capitulated, the Heights has yet to be

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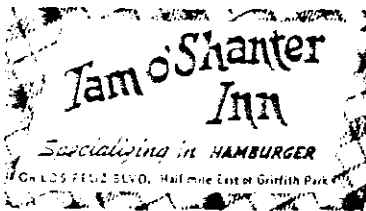
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captured. It will probably remain, for many years, the last visible monument to that wonderful era of wood-paneling, music and billiard rooms, handsome wainscoating, frescoed walls, vaulted ceilings, and the frills and eccentric furbelows which once made the homes of the rich things of wonder and delight.

As a Native Son, Norman Houston is, of course, quite conscious of the history of California. The name of the insurance company he founded—the Golden State—itsself reflects the sentiments of a devoted Native Son. It is perhaps for this reason that Mr. Houston has commissioned Charles H. Alston, the artist, to do a series of murals for the main lobby of the Golden State skyscraper at Western and Adams. These murals will depict the role that Negroes have played in the general upbuilding of California. Among the figures in the murals will be that of Estevanico, the handsome Moor from Azemure, who accompanied Cabeza De Vaca on the latter's memorable wanderings in the Southwest and who led the way for Fray Marcos's expedition from Culiacan to the Zuñi villages of western New Mexico in 1539. Still another figure will be that of the fabulously interesting Mammy Pleasant of San Francisco who put up the money with which John Brown purchased the rifles for the raid on Harper's Ferry. And then, of course, there will be a figure of Biddy Mason, the Negro slave who came to San Bernardino in 1851, was freed by Sheriff Frank DeWitt at Santa Monica, married Robert Owens, a Negro livery-stable keeper, and died one of the wealthiest property owners of early-day Los Angeles. The murals will also show that four or five Negroes were present when Captain John C. Frémont raised the flag of the California Republic.

It is quite apparent, therefore, that Mr. Houston shares and has sought to symbolize in these murals the sentiment which Frederick Hastings Rindge adopted from the flag of the California Republic: "California Shall Be Ours as Long as the Stars Remain." When the new Golden State building is completed in June, it is altogether possible that the flag of the old republic may fly from its roof with this legend attached. But, when the sun comes up on another California, decades hence, the new skyscraper will probably have passed into other hands and some new group will be battling its way to recognition, seeking to scale some other "heights," and fondly imagining that California is destined to be theirs "as long as the stars remain."

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