

# THE BURKE INCIDENT:

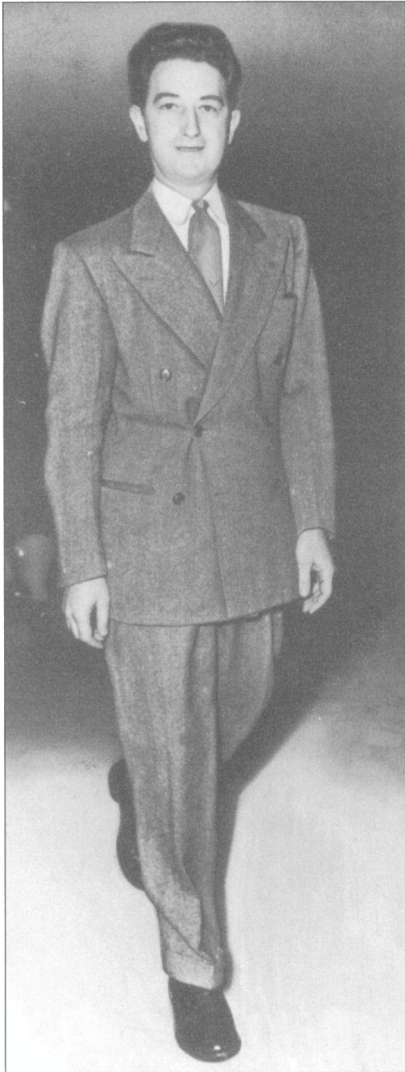
## Political Belief in Los Angeles' Public Housing During the Domestic Cold War

*by Don Parson*

In October 1946, one of the initial skirmishes of the domestic cold war in Los Angeles' public housing was beginning. Within the context of an acute housing crisis, and just prior to the State and Federal elections of 1946, surfaced what the popular press and the City Council would term "the Burke incident." This referred to Sidney and Libby Burke—acknowledged members of the Communist Party—and their residency in the city's public housing projects. The Burke incident would highlight issues of political belief in both Los Angeles and the United States. From this episode emerged certain characteristics of urban politics and public housing, particularly a paralysis of positive action in favor of redbaiting, that would plague the city until the mid-1950s.

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In March 1945, Mayor Fletcher Bowron sent a telegram to President Franklin Roosevelt: "I appeal to you for help in connection with a critical housing shortage in Los Angeles," noting that there were over 100,000 unfilled applications for rental dwellings that had been filed with either Los Angeles City Housing Authority (CHA) or the city's war housing centers. With the close of World War II, Los Angeles faced a housing shortage of truly staggering proportions. Discharged veterans, former war production workers, and returning Japanese Americans overwhelmed the existing housing stock. About 162,000 families, including 50,000 veterans, were living in tents, garages, trailers, makeshift housing, or were doubled and tripled-



Sidney Burke  
*Courtesy of the University of Southern  
California Regional  
History Center*



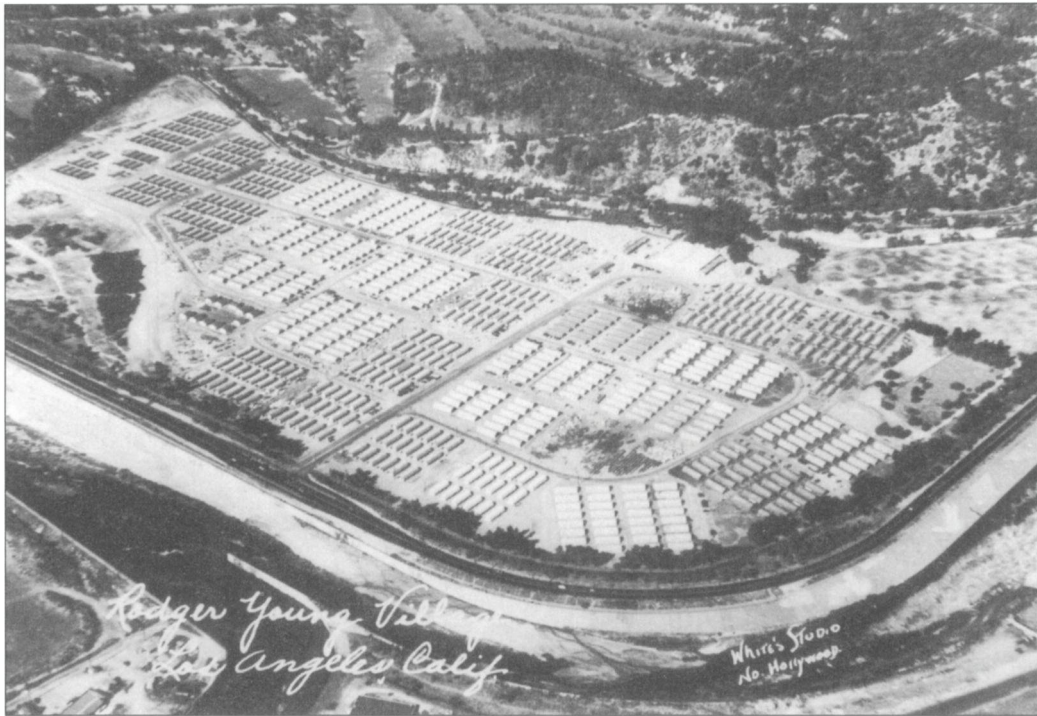
Libby Burke  
*Courtesy of the USC Regional History Center*



The Mizrahis—David, Sophie, and son Bobbie—with their pup tent in Pershing Square.  
*Photo from the Los Angeles Times, courtesy Department of Special Collections.*

up in existing houses. The California State Reconstruction and Re-employment Commission estimated that the production of 280,000 housing units over a five-year period would be required to overcome the deficiency in Los Angeles County. The housing shortage, Mayor Bowron glumly told his weekly radio audience in November 1945, “will become more acute, . . . [and] worse before it gets better. There is no relief immediately in sight.”<sup>1</sup>

Quipped the *People's World* of the intensity of the housing crisis from the perspective of discharged servicemen: “Veterans will find it just as tough establishing a beach-head on the home-front as it was in Normandy or on Iwo Jima.” In November 1945, veteran David Mizrahi, his wife Sophie and their 2-year old son, Bobbie, set up a pup tent in Pershing Square in order to publicize their and other GI's predicament. The City Park Commission ordered them to strike their tent and leave. The housing problem required, editorialized the *Daily News* about the Mizrahis' plight, “intelligent, planned



Rodger Young Village. Courtesy Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

cooperation among federal, state and local authorities,” touting the current Wagner-Ellender housing bill (which would metamorphose into the Wagner-Ellender-Taft Bill, thence the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill, finally becoming the 1949 Housing Act) as a blueprint. “If all Los Angeles can offer its returning servicemen is a priority for a park bench, we are headed for trouble.” The *Examiner* commented on the housing shortage that the Mizrahis had dramatized: “It would seem that a nation that could do so much for war could do as much for peace.”<sup>2</sup>

The CHA committed its resources to the amelioration of the housing crisis. These included the ten original projects authorized by the 1937 Housing Act; five permanent and twenty-two temporary public war housing projects that were constructed by the federal government under the Lanham Act (and managed by the CHA) for workers in the defense industries; and the Veterans’ Program which would convert war housing into temporary housing for veterans. The Federal government paid for the structures,



The Burkes' Quonset hut in Rodger Young Village.  
*Courtesy of the University of Southern California Regional History Center.*

material, and transportation of such units, while California and Los Angeles shared the cost (90%-10%) of site preparation. Five projects were initiated under the Veterans' Program: the 486-unit former-war worker dormitory of Wilmington Hall (1945), the 100-unit trailer park of Pacific Park Annex (1946), the 1500-unit Rodger Young Village constructed from quonset huts (1946), 84-unit former WAC barracks of Keppler Grove (1946), and the 1500-unit Basilone Homes (1947).<sup>3</sup>

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The Burke incident began in the veterans' housing project of Rodger Young Village. Announced to the press in January 1946, the project was dedicated on April 27, in a gala ceremony attended by local and state politicians, public housing officials, civic leaders and entertainment personalities. Comprised of 750 surplus naval quonset huts, the 1500-unit project was located in Griffith Park (about where the L.A. Zoo and Autry Museum parking lots are today). Though the necessity of cooperative living was empha-





Dance troupe consisting of (from right) Norma Daggett, Libby Burke, and Marjorie Groscup in the 1948 production of "Magdalena."  
 Courtesy Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library.

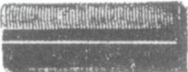

IN WAR—PRETTY RIBBONS; IN PEACE—AN EVICTION NOTICE	
<p>WAR SHIPPING ADMINISTRATION</p>  <p><i>This is to certify that</i></p> <p><u>Sidney A. Burke</u>  <small>HAS BEEN AWARDED</small></p> <p><b>The Merchant Marine Combat Bar</b>  <small>confirming active service with THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE in a ship which was engaged in direct enemy action</small></p> <p><i>AS Karon</i>  <small>ADMINISTRATOR</small></p> <p>16-35373-1</p>	<p>WAR SHIPPING ADMINISTRATION</p>  <p><i>This is to certify that</i></p> <p><u>Sidney A. Burke</u>  <small>HAS BEEN AWARDED THE</small></p> <p><b>Pacific War Zone Bar</b>  <small>confirming active service with THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE in that war area.</small></p> <p><i>AS Karon</i>  <small>ADMINISTRATOR</small></p> <p>16-35373-1</p>
<p><b>When</b> Sid Burke, Los Angeles Daily People's World editor, served with the merchant marine during the war and braved the torpedoes to get the men and stuff to the front, the government decorated him with ribbons. Now, local authorities in</p>	<p>Los Angeles, under pressure of the Hearst press and similar agencies, are evicting him, his wife and two children from their home in Channel Heights housing project, San Pedro.</p>

Illustration from the *People's World*, October 19, 1946.  
 Courtesy Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles.

sized and enforced by the housing shortage, left-right political divisions within the village—like that between the Knights of Columbus and the Communist Party—ran deep.<sup>4</sup>

The Knights of Columbus in Rodger Young Village promoted a conservative political agenda. A Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights' Supreme Council would, as the Cold War ensued, fund anti-Communist advertisements and radio addresses, and publish pro-freedom pamphlets. In early-1946 the Supreme Knight lashed out against "Godless Russia" and called for a Crusade for the Preservation and Promotion of American Ideals. In August Los Angeles Post 621 sponsored a study group to combat attacks on "the Christian way of life with informed Catholic action." On September 3 this study group welcomed California State Senator Jack Tenney to speak on the topic, "How to Determine a Subversive Group."<sup>5</sup>

The Burkes—Sidney, his wife, Libby, and their two small children, Jenifer and Valerie—had occupied one of the quonset hut apartments in Rodger Young Village since May 1946. Married in 1938, the parents were self-acknowledged members of the Communist Party. Sidney was also a member of the Newspaper Guild and the Los Angeles editor of the *People's World*, the San Francisco-based newspaper of the Communist Party on the West Coast. In addition, he was a lecturer at the Hollywood People's Educational Center. Besides being a professional dancer, Libby (previously Letitia Innes) was an energetic community activist and secretary of the Rodger Young Village Resident Council with a reputation for getting things done. Leota Smith-Flowers, formerly Leota Fantl and a writer for the *Rodger Young News*, recalled that she and Libby were among the initiators of a tenants group in the project which was formed "so that we would have a voice on what went on there. We stirred up the wrath of a bunch of fanatics & Catholics [i.e., the Knights of Columbus] who were very anti-red, [a term] which included everyone who didn't agree with them." Leota rarely saw Sid in Rodger Young Village as his editorial duties occupied most of his time: "If he spoke, it was through his wife."<sup>6</sup>

According to the chairman of the Rodger Young Village Resident Council, Clell W. Whelchel, charges of "subversive activities" were levelled against the Burkes by "interested residents" at an open meeting of the Resident Council on October 1, 1946. Similar accusations were made at a General Assembly two days later. As he had not been in the armed forces (though he had served in the merchant marine), Sidney Burke was challenged as ineligible to live in that housing project as he was a "non-veteran."



The Burkes' new home at Channel Heights was one of the apartments in this building. *Courtesy USC Regional History Center.*

Active in the nursery and promoting young people's recreation in the Village community, Libby Burke was accused of holding communist meetings and starting a youth movement in the housing project. Henry Kraus reported that a mobilization of "loyal elements" broke up a teenagers' dance in the Village which was being chaperoned by Libby. Ernie Adamson, chief counsel of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), working with the concurrent hearings of Jack Tenney's California Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, presented to Mayor Bowron a number of letters from Rodger Young Village residents complaining of Sidney being assigned a quonset hut there and of Libby's community activism.<sup>7</sup>

On October 4 Mayor Bowron ordered the CHA to evict the Burkes from Rodger Young Village. "Frankly, I cannot understand how it happened," said the mayor. "While hundreds of ex-service men are trying so



hard to find a place to live, we have an admitted Communist, who has no service connections, moved into the project established for veterans only." Bowron seemed to ignore the fact that Sidney had two years of wartime service in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters with the merchant marines, had received a combat bar for direct action, and completed his service with a U.S. Maritime Commission as ensign; or that CHA policy had refused to differentiate between veterans of the armed forces and those of the merchant marine. "The communist man and wife are not veterans," editorialized the *Hollywood Citizen-News*.

They have no credentials entitling them to occupancy of one of the units. They have been busy seeking to organize discontent and promote communism. Possibly our city Housing organization which controls the Village, needs a thorough examination to determine if there are any communists among its employees. The presence of the communist couple in the Village without any right to be there, indicates that some official is at fault.

On October 7, in language that enraged the sensibilities of the *Examiner*, CHA executive director Howard Holtzendorff, in a report to Mayor Bowron, stated that the Burkes had been merely "requested" to "transfer to a federal owned housing project for which they were eligible at the time of their original referral."<sup>8</sup>

Though they had no official voice in direct administration of the public housing projects, the City Council discussed, on October 7 and 8, the ways and means to mount an official investigation of further Communist infiltration in the city's housing projects for veterans. "We're called upon to furnish large sums of city money to support these projects," spoke Councilman Lloyd G. Davies, "yet an enemy of our form of government can get into them on a so-called 'error'." Councilman John C. Holland concurred "that this is something the Council should not shy away from." Councilman Harold Henry suggested it might be worthwhile "to go back to Washington and take the Communists out of the national housing bureau—that's where they got started in housing projects." In an October 8 resolution, Davies asked that the "Public Health and Welfare Committee take official cognizance of reports that an acknowledged communist . . . was given housing in Roger Young Village . . ." and that "Mayor Bowron be commended on . . . bringing this situation to the attention of the public." "It would also be interesting," mused Davies, "to find out how many Communists are in these housing projects." The Council, complained the *People's World*, was turning itself "into an adjunct of the Tenney un-American Committee."<sup>9</sup>

Following their eviction from Rodger Young Village, the CHA had offered the Burke family an apartment in Channel Heights—a 600-unit Lanham Act project overlooking the San Pedro Harbor—to which they moved on October 14. Designed by architect Richard Neutra and constructed in 1942, Channel Heights was one of the federal public war housing projects for which merchant marines were, assumed the CHA, eligible. The City Council, Mayor Bowron, and the popular press asked why, particularly given the housing shortage in Los Angeles, the CHA would allow this subversive family into any of its projects. “Burke is not going to live in a home paid for by taxpayers’ money while veterans are tramping the streets,” threatened Councilman Leonard Timberlake. “I am going to ask the Council to take drastic action.” An October 16 resolution, fathered by Timberlake, complained of the CHA moving the Burkes to “a more comfortable home in Channel Heights” and requested that the CHA evict the Burkes from Channel Heights or from any other CHA public housing project. Following a two-hour debate, the City Council voted 11-1 to approve the Timberlake resolution. The sole dissenting vote came from Councilman Carl Rasmussen, who charged that the Council’s eviction resolution was “part of a nationwide effort by certain forces to undermine the whole public housing program.”<sup>10</sup>

Uncertain as to the legality of the Council’s resolution, the CHA delayed taking action on the Burkes’ eviction. CHA executive-director Howard Holtzendorff and housing commission chairman Nicola Giulii went to Washington in an attempt to amend the federal statutes so as to include merchant marine veterans. On October 18 Giulii announced, “somewhat apologetically” according to the *Examiner*, from Washington that the CHA found it “necessary for the authority to request the Burke family move from the Federally owned project.” While the CHA “has not agreed with the legal interpretation barring merchant marine men and their families, it will comply with the ruling.” Giulii emphasized that CHA action in issuing an order for the Burkes’ eviction was solely a matter of statutory eligibility and he regretted the political issues that had been inserted in the case.<sup>11</sup>

Libby Burke declared, on October 19, that she and her husband would legally challenge the eviction notice served by the CHA which, due to the continuation of wartime rent controls, had to be processed through the Office of Price Administration (OPA). On October 20 Judge Stanley Mofatt—justice of the peace for San Antonio Township (Huntington Park), first vice-chairman of the Los Angeles County Democratic Central Committee, and a leader of Henry Wallace’s League of the Common Man—announced

that he would serve without fee as Burke's attorney. Ruth Marrow Slade, executive secretary of the Civil Rights Congress, Los Angeles Chapter, organized a letter-writing campaign in support of Burke: "The dangers of a witch-hunt such as . . . the Sidney Burke case are obvious: political group will be followed by racial group; racial by religious group; until all the American people are swallowed up as were the people of Germany." Moffatt volunteered his labor, he stated, "in the interests of justice and American principles of fair play." "Is it fair play," retorted the *Hollywood Citizen-News*, "for a non-veteran to occupy housing built for a veteran while other veterans are homeless? . . . Judge Moffatt and Mrs. Slade are placing the rights of communists ahead of the rights of American war veterans."<sup>12</sup>

On October 22 the Council considered a letter from Ted Carl, director of the North Hollywood Veterans' Service Center. Carl's letter told of veteran William D. Pentland and his family. Unable to find shelter, the Pentlands were living a chicken coop located at 14015 Oxnard Street in Van Nuys. The *Hollywood Citizen-News* published photographs of Pentland's meager abode on the following day. "I am against him [Burke] occupying housing set aside for war veterans," wrote W.E. Phelps to the paper. "If he has no place to go, I suggest he change places with the war veteran who is living in a chicken coop in Van Nuys with his wife and month-old baby." Seemingly oblivious to the raging housing crisis, Phelps opined of Burke that "Had he faith in our government and way of life he would have bought a home and become a real, home-owning American citizen."<sup>13</sup>

On October 23 the CHA, through its veterans' advisory committee, stated that loyalty statements would be incorporated in future dwelling applications. Such statements would not be retroactive, though the committee agreed to screen the records of current occupants as well as those of the 16,000 families who had applied for public housing. Housing Commissioner Nicola Giulii stated in a memorandum to the Veterans Advisory Committee that, while constructive criticism of the CHA was welcome, "[c]riticism inspired by political considerations on the eve of a State and National election is to be deplored." Until the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) had redefined their eligibility requirements on May 25, 1946, merchant marines had been eligible to live in the CHA-managed federal projects, Giulii pointed out. The Burkes had applied to the CHA for housing in February of 1946, and were referred to Rodger Young Village May 23—hence the snafu. Giulii proposed adding the following paragraph to the CHA's dwelling application:

Do you advocate or have you ever advocated, or are you now or have you ever been a member of any organization that advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force or violence?

\_ Yes

\_ No

If so, give complete details.<sup>14</sup>

The Burke incident—the denial of housing on the basis of political belief—set a chilling precedent for public housing tenants. “What would happen to freedom of expression in the projects with such a threat hovering over everyone?,” asked Henry Kraus in his chronicle of tenant life in Channel Heights, *In the City was a Garden*. “Who could feel secure?” “The attempt to regulate the political beliefs of residents of housing projects is an un-American, dangerous precedent,” Ruth Marrow Slade wrote to the Council. “Abrogation of any freedom is a danger to all the freedoms and to the American people generally.” Public housing should not exclude any sector of the public based on race, religion, or politics, opined *Wilmington Press-Journal* columnist Tige Clinton: “Is this America, or is it?”<sup>15</sup>

Leota and Arnold Fantl wrote to the City Council from Rodger Young Village that the Burkes’ eviction from Channel Heights would “cause many people here to fear to speak up because they are afraid of being thrown out of the project.” “It is very hard to understand,” they added, “how the Los Angeles housing problem can be solved by the eviction process.” Lupe Walker, secretary of the Inter-Project Council, wrote to the City Council that the protestations “made about the Burkes’ political beliefs [should have] nothing to do with their planned eviction. [T]he atmosphere surrounding the whole matter smacks of discrimination.” Mrs. S. Riskin, legislative director of the Emma Lazurus Division of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, I.W.O., wrote: “We expect our City Council to use their time and energy to provide housing to all veterans of all services regardless of race, color or political convictions.” Morris Yaffe, secretary of the Workmen’s Circle, Br. 983, protested the Council’s attack on “one of the basic liberties granted by the Constitution to the people of the U.S.” The Circle urged the councilmen “to revise their stand on this question of political belief for residents of public housing projects . . .”<sup>16</sup>

The National Maritime Union condemned the Burkes’ eviction as “this discriminatory, witch-hunting action of the City Council.” The denial of public housing to the Burkes “does not solve the problem of housing for veterans, a problem which has been kicked around but STILL REMAINS TO BE SOLVED.” John Taylor, port agent of the Marine Firemen Union, sent

a telegram to the president of the Council condemning the request for the Burkes' eviction. This action, he maintained, implied that the role of merchant seamen during the war to be in vain. He urged the Council to rescind their resolution and apologize to the Merchant Seamen of America. On October 22 the Committee for Maritime Unity announced plans to send a protest delegation before the City Council to respond to the Burkes' ouster from Channel Heights.<sup>17</sup>

A gathering of about 100 people confronted the Council on October 28 to demand, according to the *People's World*, "that the council stop evasive redbaiting and start constructive work to get housing for all veterans." Sidney Burke declared that the action of the council "won't solve the housing crisis by evicting me and still having 15,000 veterans homeless." He did not emphasize his own families housing plight but instead urged the council to undertake positive action such as memorializing the Wagner-Ellender-Taft (public housing and slum clearance) Bill that was then in Congress. Other speakers included Ruth Marrow Slade of the Civil Rights Congress; Kenneth Ostheimer representing the National Maritime Union; Merle Brodsky, Veterans' Director of the Los Angeles Communist Party; Calvert S. Wilson and Daniel L. Ladd of the Merchant Marine Veterans of America; Howard Roe of American Youth for Democracy; B.J. Zukas of the Los Angeles CIO Veterans Council; Mrs. Pearl Fagelson of the International Workers Order; James W. Lynch of the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association; Roland C. Haya of the American Communications Association; and Dennis Hooper of the Marine Cooks and Stewards. The pleas of Burke and his supporters for civic movement toward the amelioration of the housing crisis was seen as a ploy to disguise the real issue. "Let's stick to the subject, Communism," insisted Councilman Lloyd Davies. "Communists weren't willing to fight for this country in the critical days of 1941 [!], so why should they be eligible to public housing projects today."<sup>18</sup>

On October 30 Councilman Ed J. Davenport introduced a resolution, backed by Lloyd Davies and Leland Warburton, that \$2500 be appropriated by the Council's Public Health and Welfare Committee "to engage able investigators" to thoroughly investigate both the Burke incident as well as "the promotion of Communism in Public Housing projects." The Burke incident, read Davenport's resolution, "has heightened the conviction of many citizens, whose money builds Federal Housing, that projects are targets of Communistic propaganda and fertile fields for cultivating support by the subversive groups who would change the American way of life to that



of the Communism of Russia . . .” Davenport’s resolution was referred to the Finance Committee. He subsequently announced his intention of writing a resolution calling for a probe into Rodger Young Village by California’s Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities.<sup>19</sup>

On October 31 Judge Moffatt and attorney John T. McTernan filed an appeal to the Burkes’ eviction with the rent division of the OPA. The eviction was, according to the appeal, a “mockery” of Burke’s wartime service with the merchant marines. The FPHA ruling of May 25 which precluded merchant marine eligibility for veterans’ housing was challenged as “unwarranted and arbitrary.” They argued that the CHA had no right to seek the Burkes’ eviction from Channel Heights, besides which the time consumed by Sidney’s editorial duties at the *People’s World* did not allow him the opportunity to seek another dwelling. On November 4 Ben C. Koepke of the OPA rent control division issued a certificate of eviction requiring the Burkes to move from Channel Heights within thirty days. This decision was immediately appealed by Moffatt and co-counsel McTernan. With the expiration of the thirty-day eviction notice on December 16, the Burkes refused to quit their apartment. In response, the CHA filed a complaint of unlawful retainer against the couple.<sup>20</sup>

A November 12 report by Councilman Timberlake’s health and welfare committee recommended that sufficient personnel be hired to survey public housing projects in order to identify Communist occupants. In a November 4 legal opinion attached to that report, City Attorney Ray Chesbro revealed that the Council had overstepped its authority both in calling for the Burkes’ eviction as well as Davenport’s proposed appropriation. Not the Council, but only the California legislature, had authority over the CHA. Loyalty oaths, opined Chesbro, were probably not a constitutional means to qualify for public housing occupancy as the State Supreme Court, in *United States v. Peek*, 20 Cal.2d 536 (1942), ruled that the courts may not take judicial notice that the Communist Party advocates the overthrow of the government. Furthermore he noted, citing *Bridges v. Wixon*, 89 Law Ed. 2103 (1944), there was no certainty as to what the term ‘Communist’ connotes.<sup>21</sup>

During more than an hour of debate, several councilmen expressed the concern that should the Council not involve itself in this matter, state or federal investigating committees would. Councilman Davenport stated that “Jack Tenney’s committee has not stepped in yet solely out of courtesy to the City Council but the committee has its eye on this situation and will do

In typical McCarthyite fashion, Libby Burke was subpoenaed to appear before HUAC on stage at the Ambassador Hotel's Coconut Grove at the conclusion of this dance performance.  
*Courtesy USC Regional History Center.*



something if we don't." Timberlake argued that, as per the city attorney's opinion that the Council had no jurisdiction over the CHA, the Council should appropriate money for the CHA's veterans housing committee. In the meantime, he called for state legislation to give the city some authority in CHA operations. Councilman Davies' subsequent motion to invite California's Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities into the investigative fray was voted down 6-6. Further action by the council on this matter was delayed until the following month. "In other words," Tige Clin-

ton observed, "it appears as though the boys were backing away—but gracefully . . ." from an outside investigation. This was not too surprising, according to Clinton. "Such an investigation might uncover a few political skeletons that wouldn't smell too sweet. . ." <sup>22</sup>

On November 16 the veterans' advisory committee met with Mayor Bowron and announced that their investigation "completely absolved" the CHA of charges of favoritism that the press had insinuated since the Burke incident had broken at the beginning of October. Comprised of Al Weinberg of the Jewish War Veterans, and Solon Beatty and Don Kingman of the American Legion, the veterans' advisory committee, after screening 16,000 CHA applications, concluded that the irregularities in the placement of veterans in housing projects "was due to fraud on the part of 15 or 20 families." <sup>23</sup>

"Naturally the Burke case created an extraordinary interest in our project," wrote Henry Kraus, a member of the Channel Heights residents council sympathetic to the Burkes. "It was widely felt that the eviction of this family could well become a precedent that might eventually affect many other residents." The residents council met on the evening of November 20 to formulate a position of endorsing or rejecting the CHA's attempt to evict the Burkes. Kraus recalled that the council members and the audience spatially arranged themselves into pro-Burke and anti-Burke sides of the hall—the latter viewing Libby Burke as the Mata Hari of Channel Heights. Libby asked for the floor and described her activities at Rodger Young Village, of helping to establish a nursery there and to extend bus service for the project. "It was merely the sort of thing you people have done so much better down here and which is essential in these projects to make life a little more pleasant." While she and her family had been sent to Rodger Young Village by mistake, "to keep us out of this project where we are eligible would be punishing us for someone else's error." Mrs. Burke remained unperturbed by the sophomoric antics of the anti-Burke faction. "But the really dangerous thing," she continued, "is not what is done to my family, not the hardships it puts us under. The danger is rather that if the authorities succeeded in shelving the disgraceful housing situation by using smokescreens like this, what will happen to the other things so important to the people. . .?" Following a heated debate, the residents' council voted, 19-17, to endorse the City Council's October 16 resolution requesting the CHA to evict the Burkes from Channel Heights. <sup>24</sup>

The Finance Committee, in a December 3 report, had recommended that the Council appropriate funds for the screening activities of the CHA's

veterans' advisory committee. On December 11 the City Fathers heard the above report. The legislators were also reconsidering the idea of a state investigative committee to probe Rodger Young Village, described by Councilman John Holland as a "hotbed for communism." Radical propaganda "was being spread through the project at house parties." All occupants of public housing should be screened, maintained Davenport, as the projects were "breeding spots for communism." He announced his intention of writing such a resolution. In the meantime he would "search for the proper words" to do so. Further action was delayed until January 10 of 1947.<sup>25</sup>

On January 10 the "Burke incident" was quietly filed by the City Council in the city archives. Despite the commotion of the previous three months, the investigation of Reds in the public housing projects initiated by the City Fathers came to naught. The veterans' advisory committee of the CHA had already screened residents at the city's veterans housing projects by November 16 (above), while the funds that had been requested in Davenport's October 30, 1946 resolution were to be appropriated to reimburse the veterans' committee for their survey. The city attorney's office advised the Public Health and Welfare Committee, however, that city money could not be expended for work completed in the absence of a contract prior to the start of the work. "The survey having been conducted," concluded the Committee, "nothing remains which would form the subject matter of a contract. . ." Councilman Holland moved, seconded by Davies, to file the matter. The motion was adopted unanimously.<sup>26</sup>

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I have been unable to determine whether or not the Burkes were finally evicted from Channel Heights. Frank Wilkinson—the CHA's public relations officer at the time—cannot recall specifics but suspects the family was not. At any rate, Sid's dad helped the couple build their own home in the "red gulch" area of Echo Park. Each of the Burkes would be cited in the reports of California's Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities until 1955. Libby appeared as an uncooperative witness before HUAC hearings in Los Angeles in 1953 and, as a consequence, was suspended from her membership in the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. At some point, Sidney and Libby divorced. Libby remarried and then died during childbirth. Sid would also marry again. He and his new family moved to northern California, where Sid was employed, somewhat paradoxically, selling houses. He died in Cupertino in the mid-1990s.<sup>27</sup>

Liberal anti-communism had roots in the Communist Party's ostensible subservience to Soviet foreign policy. The abandonment of the party's liberal allies with the demise of the popular front due to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact and the sudden reversal with the 1941 Nazi invasion of the USSR was recalled, by many liberals, with feelings of betrayal and mistrust. The anti-communism that underscored the Burke incident was, however, of a rabid and rampant variety that was directed at progressive domestic policy—in this case public housing. Compared with the words and deeds of the City Council and of the press, the Communists took the high road in the Burke incident. Neither subversive nor even radical in this instance, the party called for social-democratic reform, such as the implementation of Wagner-Ellender-Taft Bill (which would, in fact, become the 1949 Housing Act), to address the housing crisis. After 1950, this vicious type of anti-communism would expand to be labelled as McCarthyism in dubious honor of the junior Senator from Wisconsin. By the early 1950s, a full-scale public housing war would erupt in Los Angeles driven, as in the Burke incident, by a rabid anti-communism rather than a factual assessment of the housing situation or, indeed, a positive program to address that condition.<sup>28</sup>

The historical trajectory of the Burke incident is revealing and suggestive. The brouhaha erupted just prior to the seminal national and state elections during the first week of November 1946 which set the tone for the ensuing domestic cold war. Placing the Burke incident within this electoral context, Henry Kraus wrote that the campaign “was marked by an ever-increasing virulence as Republicans accused Democrats of coddling the Communists and the latter sought by word and action to prove that no one hated the Reds as much as they did.” Following the campaign, interest in the incident rapidly waned until its quiet demise in January of 1947. No additional Reds were unearthed—but the housing crisis remained. Emboldened by the publicity given to the Burkes' membership in the Communist Party, the City Council took to heart the political advantages of anti-Communism, laying the groundwork for what the *Peoples' World* called “a pre-election red-baiting drive” for the municipal elections of the coming Spring.<sup>29</sup>

The formal declaration of the cold war is usually dated by Churchill's “iron curtain” speech at Fulton, Missouri in March 1946. On the domestic front, the Burke incident reveals that battle lines were drawn and troops deployed by October. With the successful prosecution and 1951 sentencing of the Communist Party's national leadership for conspiracy to advocate the violent overthrow of the government in violation of the Smith Act, the legal precedents



which the city attorney had cited (above) as to the probable unconstitutionality of loyalty oaths applied to public housing tenants were superseded. The Gwinn Amendment, which forbade the occupation of public housing by a member of an organization on the Attorney General's list of subversive groups and required a tenant loyalty oath as affirmation, was approved by the Congress in 1952. Following four years of legal wrangling—including a suit by CHA tenants—the amendment was deemed unenforceable in 1956. The Burke incident thus marked the beginning of a decade of political repression for both the public housing program and public housing tenants in Los Angeles.<sup>30</sup>

## APPENDIX:

### THE CITY COUNCIL AT THE TIME OF THE BURKE INCIDENT

1st District	Leland S. Warburton
2nd District	Lloyd G. Davies
3rd District	J. Win Austin
4th District	Harold A. Henry
5th District	George P. Cronk
6th District	Leonard E. Timberlake
7th District	Carl C. Rasmussen
8th District	Charles A. Allen
9th District	Parley Parker Christensen
10th District	G. Vernon Bennett
11th District	Harold Harby
12th District	Ed J. Davenport
13th District	John R. Roden
14th District	John C. Holland
15th District	George H. Moore

Reflecting the unity of the wartime popular front, the City Council was, by the 1945 municipal elections, oriented leftward. Tige Clinton's November 14, 1946 editorial comment regarding the Council's political skeletons thus had some factual basis. Davenport was elected in 1945 with the support of the Communist Party; Roden received considerable leftist backing as the successful recall candidate in 1946 against the 13th District sitting councilman; Christensen and Rasmussen were charter members of the Council's late-1930s "liberal bloc," considered to be sympathetic to leftist viewpoints. Moore, a middle-of-the-road politician, had accepted CIO and leftist support in his harbor district.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Fletcher Bowron to F.D.R., March 5, 1945, John Anson Ford Papers, Box 65, BIII, 14, d, folder bb(6), Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino; California State Reconstruction and Reemployment Commission, *Post-war Housing in California* (Sacramento, June 1945); "Los Angeles needs 280,000 new homes," *People's World*, November 26, 1945, 3; "House Facilities in Southland Getting Worse," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1945, Pt. II: 1, 3; "Broadcast by Mayor Fletcher Bowron, Radio Station KFI," November 1, 1945, 2, Bowron Collection, Huntington Library.
- <sup>2</sup>"No Vacancies," *People's World*, October 8, 1945, 3; "Veteran and Family Set Up Pershing Square Tent Home," *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1945, Pt. I: 1; "A house for GI Joe," *Los Angeles Daily News*, November 7, 1945; "Red Tape and Housing Shortage," *Los Angeles Examiner*, November 12, 1945, 10. Reading about the Mizrahis in a Tulsa, Oklahoma newspaper, Blair McPhail, an executive of the Tulsa-based Spartan Aircraft Co., offered the Mizrahis the temporary use of his firm's hotel suite. In addition, Spartan Aircraft's president Max W. Balfour announced that a 23-foot aluminum trailer would be shipped from Tulsa for use by the Mizrahis. David would not accept "charity" and insisted on paying rent. "Veteran's Tent Turns into Swank Hotel Suite," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1945, Pt. I: 1, 2. By dramatizing the housing crisis, Mizrahi "got help from heaven, so to speak," wrote the *Times*. "But that incident served more to point up the whole situation rather than to suggest a ready, practical solution." "The Housing Shortage Problem," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1945, Pt. II: 4.
- <sup>3</sup>Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, *Los Angeles Cares For Its Veterans* (Los Angeles, 1949).
- <sup>4</sup>"Rodger Young Village Dedication Ceremony Set For April 27th," *Los Angeles Housing News*, April 1946, 1-2; "Hero Young's Mother Speaks at Dedication of Village," *Los Angeles Examiner*, April 28, 1946; Mike Eberts, *Griffith Park: A Centennial History* (Los Angeles: Historical Society of Southern California, 1996), Chapter 19: "Home Sweet Home in Griffith Park"; Dorothy Sterling interview in Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2000), 184-85.
- <sup>5</sup>Christopher J. Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus, 1882-1982* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), 360-61. Many thanks to Michael Engh, S.J., who used his 'priestly connections' to unearth and examine the Post 621 *Minute Book* (April 1946-10 January 1950), 10, 12.
- <sup>6</sup>California. Legislature, Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities Report, *Un-American Activities in California* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1943), 134, 136, 145-46; Dorothy Sterling interview in Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 184-85; Leota Smith-Flowers to Don Parson, August 1, 2000, in possession of the author.
- <sup>7</sup>Whelchel to Mayor Bowron, October 9, 1946, Council File #25298, Los Angeles City Archives, Piper Center; Henry Kraus, *In the City Was a Garden: a Housing Project Chronicle* (New York: Renaissance Press, 1951), 189; California. Legislature, Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities., *Third Report* (Sacramento: California State Senate, 1947), 73-75; "Reds 'Invade' Village, Claim," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 4, 1946, Pt. I: 3; "Un-American inquiry chief sees Bowron," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 4, 1946, 9; "Tenney Given Data on Reds At Rodger Young," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 4, 1946, 13; "Tenney comes to L.A.," *Peoples' World*, October 5, 1946, 3.
- <sup>8</sup>"Quonset Pair to be Ousted," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1946, Pt. II: 1; "Mayor Orders Ouster of Red," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 5, 1946; "Management's Fault," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 5, 1946, 12; "Red Merely Asked To Move," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 8, 1946, Pt. II: 2.
- <sup>9</sup>"Council Asked to Investigate Reds in Village," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 7, 1946, 2; "Non-veteran ousting stirs City Council," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 7, 1946, 6; resolution by Lloyd G. Davies, October 7, 1946, Council File #25298 (Davies' resolution was discussed and referred to the Public Health and Welfare Committee on October 8); "Red Merely Asked To Move," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 8, 1946, Pt. II: 2; "Council Eying Quonset Tenants," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1946, Pt. I: 2; "Council votes aid to Tenney," *People's World*, October 9, 1946, 3.
- <sup>10</sup>"Channel Heights Housing Project," *Architectural Forum* (March 1944): 65-74; "Red Editor Moves to Better City-Owned Project," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 15, 1946, Pt. I: 5; Resolution by L.E. Timberlake, October 16, 1946, Council File #25298; City Clerk to CHA, October 16, 1946, *ibid.*; "City Council evicts Reds from project," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 16, 1946, 3; "Evict Leftist, Council Tells Housing Authority," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1946, Pt. I: 2; "Timberlake Leads Fight," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 17, 1946; "Editor's eviction protested," *Peoples' World*, October 17, 1946, 1.

- <sup>11</sup>"Burkes' Eviction Action Delayed," *San Pedro Pilot-News*, October 17, 1946, 1; "Burke Moving 'Request' Due," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 19, 1946, Pt. I: 3; "Burkes Plan Court Fight on Eviction," *San Pedro Pilot-News*, October 19, 1946, 1, 2.
- <sup>12</sup>"Burkes Plan Court Fight on Eviction," *San Pedro News Pilot*, October 19, 1946, 1, 2; "Moffatt will fight for Burke," *People's World*, October 21, 1946, 1; Slade to 'Dear friends,' October 21, 1946, Civil Rights Congress Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research; "Champions for the Communists," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 22, 1946, 14.
- <sup>13</sup>"Vet in Coop, Red Housed Well, Charge," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 22, 1946, 1; "Out of the chicken Coop by Christmas?" *ibid.*, October 23, 1946, 3; "Town Meeting," *ibid.*, October 23, 1946, 14.
- <sup>14</sup>"Ban Radicals From Housing," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 24, 1946, Pt. I: 6; "City Housing Authority has vets' okeh," *Los Angeles Daily News* October 24, 1946, 16; "Vets Housing Fight," *People's World*, October 25, 1946, 3; Nicola Giulii to City Council, October 24, 1946 (3 pp.) plus attached memorandum to Veterans Advisory Committee, October 23, 1946 (6 pp.), Council File #25298.
- <sup>15</sup>Kraus, *In the City Was a Garden*, 189; Ruth Marrow Slade to City Council, October 18, 1946, Council File #25298, also in Civil Rights Congress Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research; Tige Clinton, "As The Tide Ebbs," *Wilmington Press-Journal*, October 19, 1946, 1.
- <sup>16</sup>Leota and Arnold Fantl to City Council, October 23, 1946, Council File #25298; Lupe Walker to Council, October 23, 1946, *ibid.*; S. Riskin to Council, October 24, 1946, *ibid.*; Morris Yaffe to City Hall, October 28, 1946, *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup>October 18, 1946 policy resolution of the National Maritime Union, Council File #25298, this resolution is also in the Civil Rights Congress Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research; Taylor to Moore, October 18, 1946, Council File #25298; "Vets' housing fight," *People's World*, October 23, 1946, 1.
- <sup>18</sup>Minutes, October 28, 1946, Council File #25298; "Fight ouster of Red from project home," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 28, 1946, 11; Jack Young, "Burke confronts council," *People's World*, October 29, 1946, 1; "Council Rebukes Group of 100 Protesting Burke Eviction," *Los Angeles Examiner*, October 29, 1946; "Mass Appeal Plan Fizzles," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1946, Pt. II: 1; "Burke Ouster Stands Despite Pleas," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 29, 1946, 13.
- <sup>19</sup>Resolution by Ed J. Davenport, October 30, 1946, in Council File #25551; "Probe of Reds By City Urged," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, October 30, 1946, 2.
- <sup>20</sup>"Burke Argues Against Ouster From Public Housing Project," *Los Angeles Examiner*, November 1, 1946, Pt. I: 7; "Burke case is appealed to OPA," *People's World*, November 1, 1946, 3; "Sidney Burke May Be Forced Out Of Channel Heights Project," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, November 5, 1946, 15; "Burkes To Be Evicted From Second Project," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1946, Pt. I: 2; "Burke Eviction Taken to Court," *San Pedro Pilot News*, December 17, 1946, 4.
- <sup>21</sup>Ray L. Chesbro, "Opinion re authority of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles . . . tenant selection," November 4, 1946, in Council File #25551.
- <sup>22</sup>Minutes, November 12, 1946, Council File #25298; "Tenney housing inquiry rejected by city council," *People's World*, November 13, 1946, 1; "Delay Voted in Probe of City Housing," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, November 13, 1946, 4; "Council Puts Off Veteran Housing Inquiry Moves," *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1946, Pt. I: 5; "City housing inquiry aimed at Reds balked by law," *Los Angeles Daily News*, November 13, 1946, 18; Tige Clinton, "As The Tide Ebbs," *Wilmington Press-Journal*, November 14, 1946, 1, 8.
- <sup>23</sup>"Bureau Cleared in Vet Housing Authority Quiz," *Los Angeles Examiner*, December 17, 1946, Pt. I: 7.
- <sup>24</sup>Kraus, *In the City Was a Garden*, 188, 190; "Residents Back Burke Ouster," *San Pedro Pilot News*, November 21, 1946, 1. In contrast to the above accounts, H.A. Jollensten, chairman of the Channel Heights residents council, reported that the council voted that 'no action' be taken regarding the Burkes' eviction order: "Project Group Differs on Burke," *San Pedro Pilot News*, November 22, 1946, 1.
- <sup>25</sup>Finance Committee to Council, December 3, 1946, Council File #25298; "City May Seek 'Red' Probe in Housing Project," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, December 11, 1946, 3; "Councilmen 'see red,'" *Peoples' World*, December 12, 1946, 3.
- <sup>26</sup>Public Health and Welfare Committee to City Council, January 10, 1947, Council File #25298; City Council Minutes, January 10, 1947; "'Sidney Burke' Incident Is Filed Away," *Valley Times*, January 11, 1947.
- <sup>27</sup>Leota Smith-Flowers to Don Parson, August 1, 2000, in possession of the author; Frank Wilkinson (Los Ange-

les: June 26, 1996), taped interview in possession of the author; Dorothy Healey to Don Parson, March 23, 1999, in possession of the author; Julian Hartt, "Dancer Shuns Quiz on Reds," *Los Angeles Examiner*, March 31, 1953; "AFTRA Trio Suspension Given OK," *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 27, 1953; telephone interview with Lillian Berland, September 29, 2001.

<sup>28</sup>Don Parson, "Los Angeles' Headline-Happy Public Housing War," *Southern California Quarterly* 65 (Fall 1983): 251-85.

<sup>29</sup>Kraus, *In the City Was a Garden*, 187; "Councilmen 'see red'," *People's World*, December 12, 1946, 3.

<sup>30</sup>*Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951); "Gwinn Amendment" (82nd Congress, 2nd Session, chapter 578, July 5, 1952), 66 *United States Statutes at Large*, 403; *Housing Authority v. Cordova*, 130 C.A.2d Supp. 883; 279 P.2d 215, January 1955; "Gwinn Amendment is Dead," *Journal of Housing* 13 (August-September 1956): 279.