

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 3 (2022)

Title

From Los Angeles to the Inland Empire: The Flourishment and Implication of Jim Crow, Housing Discrimination in Postwar Southern California

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h83z8jq>

Author

Chilaka, Akunna

Publication Date

2023-04-01

From Los Angeles to the Inland Empire

The Flourishment and Implication of Jim Crow, Housing Discrimination in Postwar Southern California

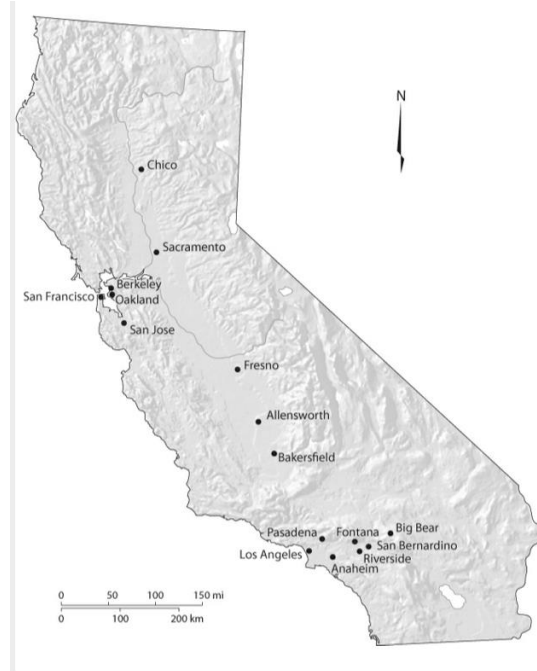
Akunna Chilaka

History of Public Policy & Law, University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

This paper explores the tragic story of African American O'Day H. Short and his family in 1945 Fontana, California. The piece is an excerpt from my March 2022 Senior Honors Thesis titled "The American Dream Denied: The Inland Empire and Southern California's Legacy with Postwar, Anti-Black Racial Housing Discrimination." Alongside my complete thesis, this paper's examination of O'Day H. Short's background, hostility with local white neighbors in his new Fontana home, and eventual fatal conclusion will ultimately expose the hidden legacy of harmful housing discrimination in post-World War Two Southern California. Focusing on Short's story further highlights the underappreciated stories of the Black Americans who migrated to Inland Empire cities – including Fontana and Riverside, between the 1940s and the 1960s. By tracing the explicit racial violence that fueled housing discrimination, I will show how and why the Postwar promise of guaranteed housing and greater socioeconomic stability went unfulfilled for this subset of Black Californians.

Chilaka



A map of California from Lynn M. Hudson's West of Jim Crow. The cities crowded together southward encompass what is often deemed as Southern California's Los Angeles (LA) and Inland Empire (IE): Pasadena, Los Angeles, Anaheim, Fontana, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Big Bear.¹

"What any person can know with entire certainty...is that the Shorts were victims of Jim Crow...All the Shorts are dead. Only Jim Crow is alive."²

The Los Angeles Sentinel's John Marshall reflecting over the deaths of O'Day H. Short and his family in Fontana in the Sentinel's February 28, 1946 issue.

¹ "A Map of California," Lynn M. Hudson's *West of Jim Crow*, 2020, <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/chapter/2731788/pdf>.

² "John Marshall," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 26, 1946, 7.

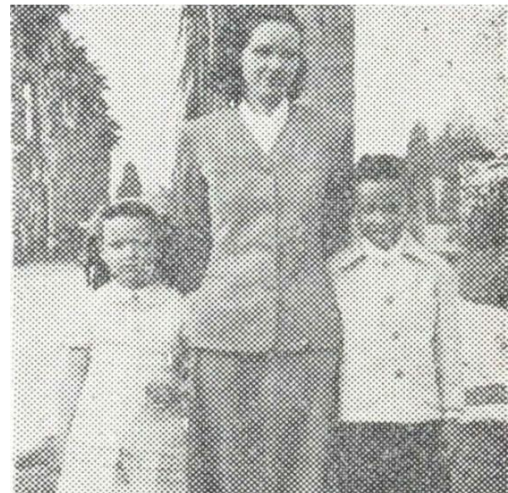
December 16th, 1945: The Day Terrorism Entered an Inland Town

Sunday, December 16th, 1945. At first glance, the date symbolizes the early days of America's immediate Postwar era; a mere three months prior, World War II was formally declared over on September 2nd.³ This event was indicative of the United States' simultaneous literal and figurative entrance into the modern, Postwar age, standing as a world power with an abundance of jobs, affordable suburbs, and strong family units. Knowing this, one might see the date, December 16th, 1945, and assume that nothing noteworthy, let alone insidious, could occur on a day amid America's resurgence. Yet, ultimately, December 16th, 1945, lives in subtle infamy. It is a day emblematic of the region's existing racial resentment clashing with the ongoing Postwar middle-class suburbanization that was paradoxically deemed as accessible for all. This nuanced clash robbed a Black man and his family of their American Dream in Fontana, a town in Southern California's San Bernardino County, part of the greater Inland Empire. It was that Sunday evening when O'Day H. Short, his wife Helen, and two children, Barry and Ann, were victims of a fatal house bombing that took both their Fontana home and lives.

The Shorts: Victims of the Dubious American Dream Ideal



Picture of O'Day H. Short⁴



Left to Right: Carol Ann Short, Helen Short, Barry Short⁵

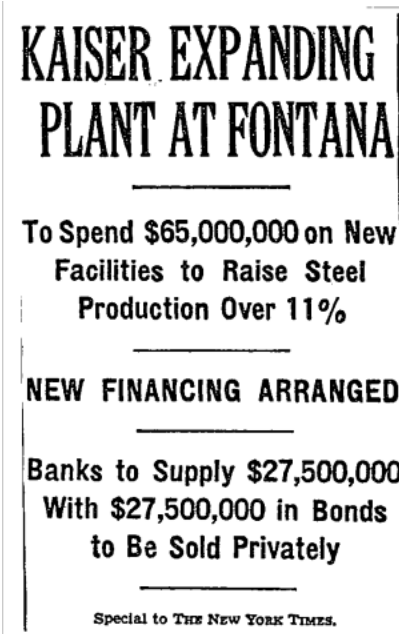
The Shorts had a story akin to many white families in the immediate Postwar period. The young Black Californian family merely attempted to relish in the amenities of affordable, suburban housing and secure industry jobs that numerous cities in the state offered, exemplified with the Inland Empire's Fontana. Indeed, Southern California cities like Fontana personified the romanticized Postwar suburbanization that took over the nation; fifty miles east of Los Angeles and formally incorporated in

³ "The End of World War II 1945," The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/end-world-war-ii-1945>.

⁴ "O'Day H. Short," *From Vigilante Terror in Fontana*. 1946.

⁵ "O'Day H. Short's Wife and Children," *From Vigilante Terror in Fontana*. 1946.

1952, Fontana was one of the many cities in the IE to undergo a transition from rural to suburban in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁶ This suburbanization was largely due to multi-millionaire Henry J. Kaiser's development of his steel mill.⁷ Kaiser had a substantial footprint on the IE, with his eponymous steel mill fostering a plethora of industry jobs that guaranteed Americans easy entrance into secure, middle-class living—a position that the Postwar nation idealized. Thus, whether white or black, many were now attracted to Southern California's Inland Region, and O'Day H. Short was no exception.



Title from The New York Times' March 7th, 1952 issue, suggesting the national recognition and publicization of Kaiser's industry developments in Fontana.⁸

O'Day H. Short's background is best detailed in Lynn M. Hudson's book *West of Jim Crow*. Hudson's commentary showcases Short as a man who was inherently a proactive, hard worker that simply wanted what was best for his young family. A native Black Angeleno for over twenty-five years, Short was a victim of Los Angeles's Postwar boom in population and development, a boom that inadvertently triggered a housing shortage which outrightly priced-out and ultimately displaced many native Black

⁶ "Trends for Fontana's Future- Fontana in the Context of the Inland Empire," Fontana, CA - Official Website | Official Website, last modified November 13, 2018, <https://www.fontana.org/DocumentCenter/View/26757/Chapter-2---Trends-for-Fontanas-Future>.

⁷ "Fontana in the Context of the Inland Empire."

⁸ "KAISER EXPANDING PLANT AT FONTANA," *New York Times*, March 7, 1952.

Angelenos from the established urban mecca.⁹ Moreover, with *Shelley V. Kraemer* still a few years away, restrictive racial housing covenants reigned over Los Angeles, further exacerbating the housing shortage, and barring Short and other minorities from Los Angeles's desirable, majority-white neighborhoods.¹⁰ This overwhelming predicament, alongside Short's personal aspiration to ensure his family's well-being, drove him to migrate his family to Fontana, one of the many blossoming SoCal Inland boomtowns in the Postwar years. As a refrigeration engineer, Short viewed Fontana's plentiful Kaiser Steel mill industry jobs with optimism. Likewise, the Inland borough's abundance of new, spacious suburban housing greatly excited the Shorts. Short ultimately purchased his Fontana home in September 1945;¹¹ the family subsequently moved into their home south of Fontana's Baseline Street in early December 1945—an area no Black family had ever resided beforehand.¹² This aspect to the Shorts' move is rather troubling; regardless of national mantras of Postwar progress and enlightenment, mid-twentieth century America—and Southern California—nevertheless subscribed to a Jim Crow social order where Black people and other marginalized communities were ostracized. Hence, the idea of a Black family moving into a white neighborhood was bound to incite tension. However, it is noteworthy that Fontana explicitly denounced Jim Crow's embarrassing stranglehold—an act that could understandably reassure Black Californians like Short who were accustomed to rampant, daily prejudice. Lynn M. Hudson highlights how the Inland town promoted itself as a place, "[...] free of the Jim Crow restrictions that increasingly hemmed in and humiliated black citizens."¹³ Despite outward expressions, however, O'Day H. Short's quest for socioeconomic stability dispels the notion of Postwar Fontana as a Jim-Crow free zone. His presence met instantaneous backlash and subsequent fatal brutality from Fontana's white residents.

The Murder of O'Day H. Short and his Family: The Horrors Before, Amid, and After

Indeed, with their move into a white neighborhood, local white residents quickly mobilized against the Shorts, violating the family's personal space and autonomy in the process. *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, a Black Californian newspaper crucial in publicizing and confronting SoCal's Postwar fair housing effort, frequently documented and exposed the Shorts' dangerous reality to its Southern Californian readers.¹⁴ In a January 3rd, 1946 editorial, the *Sentinel* details a visit Short had with local deputy sheriffs "Tex" Cornelison and Joe Glines at his recently purchased residential property. In this visit, the two sheriffs delivered Short and his family a candid warning: that they were "out of bounds" and needed to move to

⁹ Lynn M. Hudson, "Burning Down the House: California's Ku Klux Klan," in *West of Jim Crow: The Fight against California's Color Line* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 167-168, muse.jhu.edu/book/78346.

¹⁰ Hudson, "Burning Down the House," 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹² *Ibid.*, 192.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ For more on *The Los Angeles Sentinel* see: "The Los Angeles Sentinel Newspaper is Published," African American Registry, last modified November 12, 2021, <https://aaregistry.org/story/the-los-angeles-sentinel-newspaper-begins/>.

alleviate neighbors' complaints.¹⁵ Where exactly did Cornelison and Glines expect the Shorts to move to? In her February 1946 hard-hitting op-ed, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana*, local progressive trailblazer and Los Angeles' Social Workers Party (SWP) organizer Myra Tanner Weiss reveals that Fontana's segregated "Negro area" was the expected and preferred destination for the Black Californian family.¹⁶ Such an interaction exemplifies the clear, established disregard for the Shorts' livelihoods among their white peers; indeed, as enforcers of the local law, Cornelison and Glines not only should have attested the unequivocal right Short had to living on his property to the complaining white neighbors, but protected the Short family's right to housing and larger property ownership in private residential areas.¹⁷ However, considering that the officers went out of their way to give Short a frank warning at his home, it is undeniable that the quest to rid Fontana of O'Day H. Short's controversial presence at all costs was not only a collective effort amongst the town's white inhabitants, but garnered support from local federal actors.

The Shorts continued to face white pushback in the two weeks leading up to their deaths; on December 3, 1945, J. Sutherland, the white real estate broker who sold O'Day H. Short his Fontana lot, told Short about a vigilante committee that was determined to "deal" with the apparent Short problem:

"Short, the vigilante committee had a meeting on your case last night. They are a tough bunch to deal with. If I were you, I'd get my family off this property at once."¹⁸

Sutherland's words signaled a dangerous shift in the ongoing vitriol towards O'Day H. Short and his family, as he confirmed the vigilante committee's commitment to violence in their grave threat.¹⁹ Despite the undeniable fear such threats could trigger, Short was not idle amid this ongoing white opposition. In his final weeks, Short connected with his attorney Ivan J. Johnson, a prominent NAACP lawyer from Los Angeles.²⁰ Following Johnson's advice, Short informed the FBI about the threats, and subsequently alerted local Black Californian newspapers like the *Sentinel* and *California Eagle* about his tribulations.²¹ The *Sentinel* even published an interview with Short on December 6th, 1945, where the man recalled his, "[...] encounter with the vigilantes and his dangerous predicament."²² It is these facts that suggest the spirit of protest and autonomy that O'Day H. Short and greater Black Californians had in the Postwar era; while already accustomed to centuries-long discrimination in the mid-twentieth century, evidently African Americans did not stay passive when being denied an entry into Postwar modernity, stability, and wealth accumulation. However, O'Day H. Short's activism unfortunately did

¹⁵ "Violence Threat Against Short Must Not Go Unchallenged: AN EDITORIAL," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 3, 1946, 1.

¹⁶ Myra T. Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana: The Tragic Story of O'Day H. Short and His Family* (Los Angeles: SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY LOS ANGELES LOCAL, 1946), 7.

¹⁷ "Violence Threat Against Short Must Not Go Unchallenged: AN EDITORIAL," 1.

¹⁸ Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana*," 7.

¹⁹ Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana*," 7.

²⁰ Hudson, "Burning Down the House," 192.

²¹ Hudson, "Burning Down the House," 192.

²² Ibid.

little to deter Fontana's white vigilantes; ten days following the *Sentinel* interview, while the nation at large continued to craft an optimistic, just future, between 5:30 p.m. and 5:45 p.m., flames engulfed the Shorts' Fontana home.²³

*"The Short children were screaming; their mother was trying to quiet their cries. The two boys took the family to the hospital. The little girl Carol Ann, aged 7, was the first to die. Barry, aged 9, died during the night. By morning their mother, Mrs. Helen Short, was dead. Short himself died five weeks later."*²⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the Shorts' fatal house bombing, reports from Fontana's key federal officials like Fire Chief Ed Reeves and, questionably, Sheriff Joe Glines, deemed the Shorts' deaths an "accident", on the part of O'Day H. Short filling a lamp with kerosene that consequently caused the explosion²⁵. Such a narrative grew traction in mainstream Inland SoCal publications like the *San Bernardino Sun*, which included in its December 17th, 1945, issue the article "Three Injured by Exploding Lamp", citing the officials' testimonies.²⁶ However, this notion of an accidental explosion is farfetched, if not Fontana's egregious attempt to curtail rightful outrage at the fatal Short incident. Further publicity from the Los Angeles NAACP, Black California newspapers, and progressive activists, exemplified with Myra Tanner Weiss, helped unveil the insidious truths behind December 16th, 1945. From Weiss's 1946 pamphlet, one is made privy to the fact that those who vehemently asserted the Shorts' deaths as an accident comprised of individuals like Joe Glines and "Tex" Cornelison, people who previously issued warnings, outright threats, to the Short family in the weeks leading up to the fatal house burning.²⁷ Likewise, in the *Sentinel*'s January 10th, 1946 issue, the "Kerosene theory" concerning the Short incident is flatly denied, emphasizing the NAACP's consultation with arson expert Paul T. Wolfe.²⁸

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana*, " 8.

²⁵ Special Staff Correspondence, "Three Injured by Exploding Lamp," *San Bernardino Sun*, December 17, 1945.

²⁶ Special Staff Correspondence, "Three Injured by Exploding Lamp."

²⁷ Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana*, " 9.

²⁸ "NAACP Brands Fontana Fire as Incendiary; Kerosene Theory Flatly Denied By Arson Expert," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 10, 1946, 1.

Vigilante Terror in Fontana

THE TRAGIC STORY OF
O'DAY H. SHORT AND HIS FAMILY



By
MYRA TANNER WEISS
Organizer, Los Angeles Local
Socialist Workers Party

Price 10 cents

*Title Cover of Weiss's Pamphlet Vigilante Terror in Fontana.*²⁹

NAACP Brands Fontana Fire As Incendiary; Kerosene Theory Flatly Denied By Arson Expert

*News Article Header for Sentinel's January 10th, 1946 issue.*³⁰

Undoubtedly, Fontana's attempted coverup of the severity of the Shorts' deaths unsettled O'Day H. Short's allies. Such allies included *California Eagle's* Charlotta Bass and SWP's Weiss, who organized mass, grassroots demonstrations throughout the Inland Empire. From Fontana to San Bernardino, these protests demanded government investigations into not just the deadly Short debacle, but potential Ku Klux Klan activity in Fontana and greater Southern California.³¹ From such explicit local public pressure, Los Angeles's Attorney General Robert W. Kenny assured an, "independent and thorough" probe into "the mysterious fire" on February 13th, 1946.³² Furthermore, the Short family's deaths even garnered

²⁹ Weiss, *Vigilante Terror in Fontana: The Tragic Story of O'Day H. Short and His Family.*"

³⁰ "NAACP Brands Fontana Fire as Incendiary."

³¹ "Grace E. Simons, "Attorney General Kenny Urged to Push Probe of Fontana Fire," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 31, 1946, 8.

³² "R.W. Kenny Probing Fontana Fire Deaths," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 13, 1946, 23.

attention from the White House; in the *Sentinel's* April 18th, 1946 issue, it is revealed that director of San Bernardino's USO, W. Burdette Hockaday, traveled to Washington D.C to bring awareness of the demand for justice in Fontana among local SoCal residents to President Truman and U.S Attorney General Tom Clark.³³

*"W. Burdette Hockaday [...] planned to leave the Burbank airport Friday night for Washington, where he will present to President Truman and US attorney General Tom Clark the demand of San Bernardino central council for a federal investigation into the vigilante threats and disastrous fire in Fontana, December 16th of last year [...]"*³⁴

What the O'Day H. Short's Story Reveals about the Postwar Black Californian Experience

Beginning with an examination of O'Day H. Short's story is undeniably painful. Indeed, spotlighting the racial taunting and inevitable horror the Black Californian man and his family endured demonstrates that Fontana, the Inland Empire, and Southern California overall were susceptible to the antiblack, anti-minority sentiments that plagued predominantly white suburbs nationwide in the immediate Postwar period. Like many Black Californians in the Postwar era, Short merely pursued a chance at the "good life"—one where past hardship was erased and subsequently replaced with homeownership, socioeconomic security, and—above all—a prosperous, nurtured family. Yet, evidently this desire rarely went easily fulfilled for African Americans; while the Postwar fruits were advertised as in abundance and accessible for all, the potential scenario of integrated neighborhoods and workplaces fostered much anxiety in many white Americans, as it challenged their established social status as the dominant racial group. Therefore, even in Southern California's budding, virtually untapped Inland suburbs, white anxiety towards marginalized communities' presence was prevalent, and O'Day H. Short, unfortunately, exemplifies this reality.

Undoubtedly, the Short family murder is indicative of the many violent crescendos amid the Postwar racial housing struggle in the Inland Empire and greater Southern California. Sadly, as the period progressed, African American homeowners and workers faced a SoCal region rife with blatant discrimination and prejudice. As Hudson notes, the Inland Empire and Southern California experienced a bizarre resurgence in racial hostility and Klan activity following the war.³⁵ Consequently, Black Californians and other marginalized communities were disproportionately targeted for their presumed social misdeeds. Their crimes? Daring to inhabit traditional "white spaces", desiring civil rights, and partaking in Postwar socioeconomic prosperity—acts that dismayed many of their white, prejudiced counterparts³⁶

³³ "Fontana Probe Plea Taken to Pres. Truman," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 18, 1946, 1.

³⁴ "Fontana Probe Plea," 1.

³⁵ Hudson, "Burning Down the House," 201.

³⁶ Hudson, "Burning Down the House," 201.

Bibliography

"A Map of California." *Lynn M. Hudson's West of Jim Crow*. 2020. <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/chapter/2731788/pdf>.

"The End of World War II 1945." The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. Accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/end-world-war-ii-1945>.

Hudson, Lynn M. *West of Jim Crow: The Fight against California's Color Line*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020. Kindle. muse.jhu.edu/book/78346.

Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles). "Fontana Probe Plea Taken to Pres. Truman." April 18, 1946, 1.

Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles). "NAACP Brands Fontana Fire As Incendiary; Kerosene Theory Flatly Denied By Arson Expert." January 10, 1946, 1.

Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles). "John Marshall." February 26, 1946, 7.

Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles). "Violence Threat Against Short Must Not Go Unchallenged: AN EDITORIAL." January 3, 1946, 1.

"The Los Angeles Sentinel Newspaper is Published." African American Registry. Last modified November 12, 2021. <https://aaregistry.org/story/the-los-angeles-sentinel-newspaper-begins/>.

Los Angeles Sentinel (Los Angeles). "R.W. Kenny Probing Fontana Fire Deaths." February 13, 1946, 23.

"O'Day H. Short." *From Vigilante Terror in Fontana*. 1946.

"O'Day H. Short's Wife and Children." *From Vigilante Terror in Fontana*. 1946.

New York Times (New York). "KAISER EXPANDING PLANT AT FONTANA." March 7, 1952.

Special Staff Correspondence. "Three Injured by Exploding Lamp." *San Bernardino Sun* (San Bernardino), December 17, 1945.

Simons, Grace E. "Attorney General Kenny Urged to Push Probe of Fontana Fire." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (Los Angeles), January 31, 1946, 8.

"Trends for Fontana's Future- Fontana in the Context of the Inland Empire." Fontana, CA - Official Website | Official Website. Last modified November 13, 2018. <https://www.fontana.org/DocumentCenter/View/26757/Chapter-2---Trends-for-Fontanas-Future>.

Weiss, Myra T. *Vigilante Terror in Fontana: The Tragic Story of O'Day H. Short and His Family*. Los Angeles: SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY LOS ANGELES LOCAL, 1946