



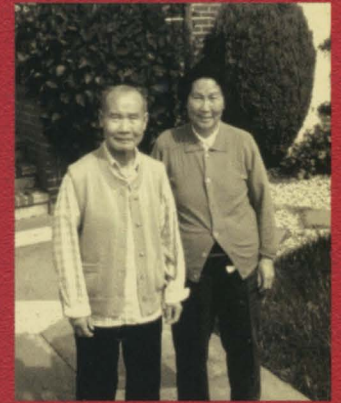
# I am @MI

Ocean View

Merced Heights

Ingleside

## Creating Community

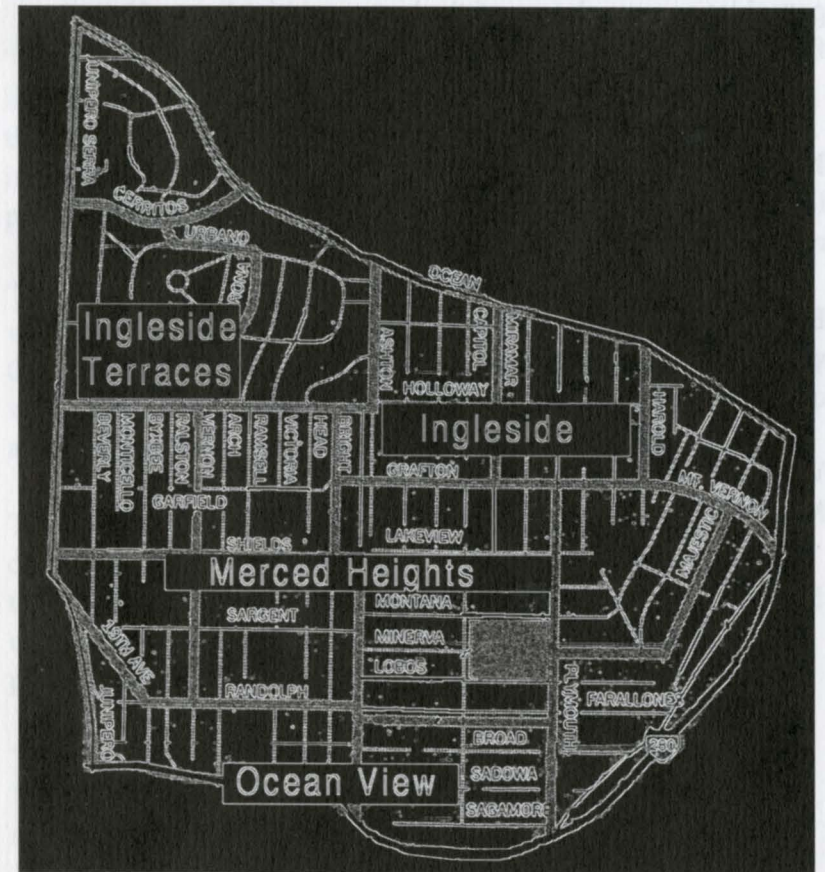




The OMI Community is a vibrant, historic neighborhood in San Francisco, located in the heart of the city. It is a diverse and inclusive community that has been thriving for over a century. The OMI Community is a place where people from all backgrounds and cultures come together to create a sense of belonging and community.

# I AM OMI

Creating Community





## I am OMI – Creating Community

The OMI (Ocean View – Merced Heights – Ingleside) lies in the southwest corner of San Francisco, bordered by Ocean Avenue, Interstate 280 and Junipero Serra Boulevard. An often-neglected community with a fascinating history, the OMI is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in one of the country's most diverse cities.

This booklet will focus on the OMI in the years between World War II and 2004, as told in the words of current and former residents, business owners, and civic leaders. It is by no means an exhaustive history of the neighborhood. Think of this pamphlet as a quick tour of the historical highlights. You can find lots more on our Web site: [www.outsidelands.org](http://www.outsidelands.org).

In 2003, we published *Building of a Neighborhood*, which looked at the OMI's origins and development. (If you haven't received a copy, drop us a line and we'll send you one.)

Email or call project director Woody LaBounty at [woody@outsidelands.org](mailto:woody@outsidelands.org) or 415-643-8995 if you have any questions or information to share!

Western Neighborhoods Project  
March 2004

## Filling the Gaps

In the years leading into World War II, the expansive vegetable fields and open hills of the OMI gave way to a carpet of homes. Federal Housing Administration financing gave both builders and buyers an opportunity to fill in the gaps. Doelger Brothers and smaller-scale contractors built up from Ocean View and Ingleside, meeting at the ridgeline of Merced Heights.

"It was sad seeing all these beautiful fields of wildflowers disappearing. We used to play hide-and-seek in the tall grass and the 'johnny-jump-ups', poppies, lupin, and pansies..."  
--- Winifred Desch

"I was very disappointed when we went over there and I looked up and said, 'Where's my goddamn hill?' You know, up there on top of the hill, all houses now. They just took all that-- it was beautiful. Nice spot. You could go up there and have a picnic and whatever." --- Ray Wilson

"...the entire hill was all vacant and open and still had wildflowers, poppies, pansies. And we used to play up in there, run all around. Even up in behind the end of Josiah Street was a completely opened hill, a lot of exposed rocks... that's all been developed since I was a little kid." --- John Gross

The disappearance of open space wasn't the only change coming to the OMI. Thousands of workers, who had come to the Bay Area from all over the nation to aid in shipbuilding and other war industries, decided to make San Francisco their permanent home.

"Some of the employers would say [to African-Americans] 'We're glad you came out and helped us out during the war, now when do you think you're going back?' Some of us said, 'We're not going back. We like it here. We're going to stay here.'" --- Maude Furlough.



## A New Look

"My grandmother [would] say, 'You sit in the back of the streetcar, because I'm going to be in the front, and it looks bad to have that many children now in the United States.' She'd do things that were kind of unusual, powder their faces [to make them look more Anglo][...] She was kind of like trying to fit in, and the kids had this double message."

--- Margie Whitnah, whose mother came to Ingleside Terraces from Mexico in the 1920s.

There had been people of color in the OMI before the war. Jiichiro and Matsuye Goto ran a laundry at 1439 Ocean Avenue before being sent to relocation camps with thousands of others of Japanese descent. A few Filipino and Hispanic families were sprinkled in Ingleside and Ocean View, but the vast majority of OMI residents into the 1950s were Caucasian.

Beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s, pioneering African-American families looked away from the crowded conditions of the inner neighborhoods to the new homes and more residential blocks of the OMI.

Early on, some of the OMI's white residents actively resisted the integration of the neighborhood by attempting to form homeowners groups and intimidating those who might sell to African-Americans.

"They were trying to go after the real estate place that actually let the blacks come in... [There] was fighting with the realtors. I think there was even a few punch-outs in between, too."

--- Ray Wilson.

Some of the realtors refused to show homes to African-Americans, or lied that available homes were sold. Other agents actively sought their business. Many played on people's fears, trying to convince residents to list their homes and sell

before the neighborhood became a "ghetto" and property values fell.

"See, sometimes people are so stupid. The houses, as soon as African-American families moved in, people moved out. What is that about? Do you know what I'm saying?" --- Rita Rivera Doyle.

Like many urban American neighborhoods in the 1950s and 60s, the OMI experienced a "white flight" as older homeowners left for the new suburbs in the outlying counties. At the same time thousands of African-American families were being forced out of the Fillmore and Western Addition by redevelopment and many came to the OMI for a fresh start.

Many of these new OMI residents faced attempts at intimidation and threats of violence. In 1956 Herman Browne had a rock thrown through his dining room window, and walked out to find a cross burning in front of his home. <sup>1</sup> Two years later the Reverend Asa J. Davis Jr. received a bomb threat at Pilgrim Congregational Community Church telling him to "get out of town or we'll blow the church up." <sup>2</sup>

The most well known racial incident from the time occurred outside the Poole family home in June 1958.

"My favorite thing to do was to try to beat my dad to the garage. I think he would go outside along the street, and I'd cut through the backyard, and I'd always beat him. [...] And I did that one day and ran smack into a burnt cross."

--- Patti Poole



Pooles with cross  
Duke Downey/San Francisco  
Chronicle 1958



Patti Poole was six years old at the time, and stayed home from school while her parents talked to reporters and defended the people of Ingleside Terraces.

"I know this much---I'm sure none of my neighbors would do this sort of thing," said Cecil Poole, and his wife Charlotte put in "Our children have made some wonderful friends in the neighborhood. That has been the important thing to us."<sup>3</sup>

Cecil Poole was a trailblazer: the first African-American assistant district attorney in San Francisco, one of the first African-Americans to be named United States Attorney, first African-American district court judge in California and only the second African-American judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, the Pooles' home at 90 Cedro Avenue was originally built and lived in by Joseph Leonard, the developer of Ingleside Terraces and the man responsible for the housing covenants that tried to prohibit minority ownership. The wonderful craftsman home is now City Landmark Number 213.<sup>5</sup>

Despite such obstacles as the Browne, Poole, and other families encountered, a strong African-American presence arose in the OMI, with dozens of churches, active improvement groups, and small neighborhood-centered businesses and restaurants. The legacy of this community continues today, especially in Ocean View.

"The neighborhood at that time (in 1966) was over 60% African-American. We had African-American businesses all along Randolph Street, all along 19th Avenue. We had African-American physicians and dentists here, and a nice arcade of stores." --- Agnes Morton.



Ocean Avenue, 1950. Courtesy of Jack Tillmany

### Ocean Avenue – Glory, Decline and New Rise

The old Ocean Road, once home of gambling haunts, racetracks, and boxing camps had become Ocean Avenue, the main commercial strip for the OMI. Despite the opening of nearby shopping malls, the Avenue did a good business in the 1950s, especially the El Rey Theatre.

"They had kids' matinees there every Saturday. Folded popcorn things were always thrown up in the air, and all the candy going through the air and everything, but we had a hell of a lot of fun, though." --- Ray Wilson

"[The] early movies that I saw that really gave me a fright. Actually, I'm thinking of two of them. *War of the Worlds* was one, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I saw those within a couple of weeks of each other, and I never did really like scary movies like that. [...] I remember lines around the corner trying to get in to see certain movies." --- John Gross

"Oh, god. I spent weekends there. I mean, Kathy and I would



go. We'd plot out what movie we wanted to see, especially like James Bond or whatever was coming out. We'd go to the first show if we could, and we'd stay all day." --- Patti Poole

People still have fond memories of popular restaurants such as Sampan's, the Red Roof, Club Zanzibar, and the Cookie Tree.

"Betty's Hamburger. That was the best. Truck drivers, everybody would stop there. [...] You got the best hamburgers. It's what you'd call an old-fashioned American restaurant. Okay, on Tuesday, there'd be meatloaf. On Friday, she'd have fish. Every day there was a regular menu, but also a special for that day. It was real, real nice." --- Rita Rivera Doyle.

In 1969, the first "Gap" store opened on Ocean Avenue beginning a corporate empire running into the billions of dollars. The street hosted San Francisco's first McDonald's as well. But the vibrancy of the OMI's main commercial corridor began to fade.

The grounds of a former orphanage, Homewood Terrace, stood forlornly empty for years as plans for 19-story-tall apartment towers foundered. "The Ingleside, still rolling through terrific demographic changes and a drop in property values, got an undeserved reputation that hurt business.

"Oh, no, they warned [my mother] not to come here. They told her this is not a good neighborhood, the crime rate... I'm going to tell you, when we came here, I remember opening day. They welcomed us, the neighbors, the people that live in the community. Like I said, I can't say nothing but nice things about the people that we've dealt with." --- Rita Rivera Doyle.

The El Rey succumbed to a bad economy in 1977, (becoming the Voice of Pentecost Church). Safeway grocery stores failed twice on Ocean Avenue in two different locations, and many residents took their business to neighboring Stonestown Shopping Center.

Local businesses and neighborhood groups lobbied and fought for a revitalization of Ocean Avenue for a good two decades, and finally in the late 1990s real work began to be seen with the re-laying of streetcar tracks, the installation of new lighting, and the addition of palm trees. The road to this new Ocean Avenue was a rocky one, with OMI leaders, merchant groups, and community organizations often at odds with each other over issues such as pedestrian "bulb-outs", parking, and fund allocations.

"So there was a little fight right there in the gym, and sometimes I'd have to hold folks to one side, or jump up and get ready to work it out, 'We've got to talk.' You know what I mean?" --- Reverend Roland Gordon.

The scars from these disagreements still haven't fully healed as Ocean Avenue continues to be reinvented. A number of institutions act as anchors from the past---the Fruit Barn, Lili Knits, Focus 2000, and the Avenue Club---while new businesses such as cafés and tapioca drink bars have moved in to cater to a fresh wave of OMI residents.

### **Birth of a Park**

Since the 1930s Helen and Jesse Brooks had lived on the west edge of Merced Heights, surrounded by beautiful open space and well-kept gardens. But by the mid-1960s the city had been built up to their property line and the Brooks decided to retire to a more rural setting on the Peninsula. They explored selling the house and land, which amounted to some fourteen city lots. The City of San Francisco became interested, and after a very rocky negotiation process the Brooks' sold the city its newest park for \$70,000 in 1966.<sup>7</sup>

Up until at least 1970 a caretaker couple lived in the Brooks



house, but the park's gardens soon suffered from lack of attention, becoming a littered, wild place. Informally called "Kite Hill Park" the land was essentially ignored by the city. Vandals set fire to the old Brooks home. After two more fires, the city bulldozed the remains.



The OMI Community Association formed volunteer parties under the direction of resident Lonnie Lawson to build picnic facilities, including barbecue grills. The city got behind it and at a big dedication and official naming ceremony on May 20, 1978, Mayor Moscone and other dignitaries came to welcome "Brooks Park". But even this joyous occasion had its pain. Just a month before the dedication, kids came in the night and wantonly destroyed all the tables and benches, forcing Mr. Lawson to quickly raise materials and start over. \*

The kids who vandalized the park were identified and a judge sentenced them to help rebuild. Lawson put them to work and the three youths had a big turnaround in their attitude. Lawson remembers them saying "we won't let anyone destroy what we built."

All the same, it was an ominous sign: as most of the community fought to make Brooks Park a welcoming garden spot for families and neighbors, some other part wanted it to remain a ground for crime and violence.

### **Darker Days**

"Unless you have one or more neighbors serving as a catalyst, every city park will have rough times." -- Lonnie Lawson.

The 1980s brought crack cocaine to the OMI, and Brooks Park became a haven for drug dealing. At least two bodies were dumped up on the hill until the old driveway was blocked off. In the early 1990s came the new "sport" of illegal pit bull fighting. Neighbors saw the shadowy figures leading the animals into the park at night, and in the morning often found the carcasses of losing dogs. Seriously wounded pit bulls, bred to be aggressive and dangerous, wandered bleeding around the streets.

In 1986, Peter Vaernet moved to Shields Street, just a stone's throw from Brooks Park. He saw all the problems going on, had bullets shot into his garage, watched drug deals happening out his living room window. But he also saw all the strengths of the area: the beautiful views, the open space, and the good neighbors all around him. Peter wasn't the type to lay low and hope things would get better.

In addition to chasing off the drug deals and pit bull fights, other activities had to be programmed for Brooks Park to bring in the families, the older people, to "take back" the hilltop.

Warriors from the past, such as Lonnie Lawson, returned to fight with new hope. A new entryway and playground were installed. Crime task forces worked with a neighborhood watch, and practical acts such as locking the Jose Ortega



school gates reduced the shady escape routes of the dealers. The Native Plant Society brought kids to learn about the natural environment still surviving on the old hilltop. Surplus school property was acquired to expand the park and to begin work on a community garden.

Peter will credit all the different people who stepped up, and it's true that Brooks Park today is a triumph to a community's collective will to change a bad situation. But Peter is the catalyst Lonnie Lawson talked about. He's the man who walks in his "backyard" everyday picking up litter, pulling weeds, handing out flyers for the tai chi classes, chatting with any and every person he passes. "Come to Brooks Park. See how wonderful things are."

"I'm crazy, I guess. I'm a Viking. You know, Vikings love battles. [...] I mean, I don't think I ever felt scared, because I knew what was right. And Minnie, I don't think that Minnie was scared either." --- Peter Vaernet

"Minnie" was Minnie Ward, who with her husband Lovie was already fighting the same problems down the hill.

### **Minnie and Lovie and NIA**

Will Reno from the Southwest Neighborhood Improvement Group (SNIG) remembered when the issue in Ocean View was a few guys drinking in the streets. ("We made them move along and that was it.") But in the late 1980s and 1990s crack-cocaine brought drug dealers in force, catering to quick drive-by customers off Interstate 280. The drugs brought reckless driving, intimidation of residents, and gun violence.

"It was really bad, fights, shootings stabbings right here in front of the house. Car wrecks. I wanted to move but my wife said no." --- Alex Picar.

Lovie and Minnie Ward helped form the community group "Neighbors in Action" (NIA). OMI-NIA's initial directors in 1989 included a wide net of neighbors and community leaders: Geraldine Clay, Geraldine Earp, Jim Feliciano, Jessie Flewellen, Lola Gordon, Paul Henderson, Marie Hollins, Bette Landis, Diana Carpenter-Madoshi, Jim Mayo, Steve Neff, Rev. Carole Nelson, Ed Penaloza, Ethel Pierson, Mark Romero, Bonnie Swain, Willetta Walker, and the Wards.

OMI-NIA was committed not to just eradicating the drug dealing in their neighborhood, but to providing the youth of the OMI with alternative activities. They fought to have Sheridan School rebuilt to provide a safe and modern learning environment, and to have appropriate youth programs at Ocean View Recreation Center across the street.

From Alice Lawrie's history of OMI-NIA:

"It was bad all over, but it was triple bad at the gym," said Minnie, so OMI-NIA chose to start there. They began holding their meetings there - a lot of meetings - attended by neighborhood residents as well as City officials.

**OMI:  
a tale  
of drugs,  
urban  
decay**

**Residents of  
once-desirable  
Ingleside District  
terrorized by armed  
dope dealers**



hanging out at the gym weren't used to people just coming in. Minnie remembers the young men would look at them 'like, who do they think they are?' Yet, the group was undaunted. They had come that far. When the young men hanging out got the message that OMI-NIA was not going away, 'they just sort of moved out.'"<sup>9</sup>

After a newspaper featured a story about OMI-NIA's efforts to get drug-dealers out of Ocean View Park, gunmen shot ten rounds of ammunition into the Wards' living room.<sup>10</sup>

Lovie Ward said "We're more determined than ever to fight on," and despite the threats and setbacks, the Wards and OMI-NIA made progress. In 2003 San Francisco honored Minnie and Lovie by renaming the Ocean View Recreation Center after them. Lovie Lee Ward passed away just a couple of months before the celebration. Despite this great loss Minnie continues fighting today, still serving as an inspiration to the OMI.

### **The Only Constant is Change**

"The worst thing is our neighborhood has gotten a bad rap. There are a lot of good people here." --- Dionne Roberts

The OMI's battles were well publicized and many residents had to fight not only for better services and protection, but also to defend the neighborhood's reputation. Hundreds of newcomers, driven to look for affordable homes in the real estate boom of the late 1990s, came trepidatiously to the OMI, but were usually surprised at their welcome.

"I was just amazed at how I felt part of a family, and so protected, and loved by the immediate neighbors. --- Elaine Ellsworth

The rapid turnover of home sales and escalating prices during the "dotcom" days also unsettled the neighborhood. During another exodus of older residents, the demographics quickly shifted again. Business signs on Ocean Avenue became more and more likely to feature Chinese characters, and in the 2000 US Census 45% of those living in the OMI identified themselves of Asian descent.<sup>11</sup>

The OMI is constantly in flux, as many arrivals from different counties, states, and nations get their San Francisco start in this southwestern corner. City College and San Francisco State bring in younger adults to commingle on the streets with older residents.

One of the most wonderful signs of the larger community's unity takes place each Saturday morning at Brooks Park. A free tai chi class draws in the singles and couples, gays and straights, the middle-class and the well-off, people of all colors and ages. They step through ancient movements, sweeping with their arms in unison over their shared neighborhood, the OMI.

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Those Notes:

- 1) "Cross Burns at Home of S.F. Negro", *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 27, 1956, pg. 1
- 2) "S.F. Negro Pastor Gets 'Bomb' Threat", *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 7, 1958, pg. 3.
- 3) "Cross Burned at D.A. Aide's Home," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 6, 1958, pg. 1.
- 4) James Haskins, *Cecil Poole, A Life in the Law*, Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society, Pasadena, 2002.
- 5) San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, Landmark File 213.
- 6) "Big S.F. Housing Plan, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 28, 1966, pg. 4.
- 7) J.H. Brooks, "Procedure Followed in San Francisco's Acquisition of the Brooks Home...", Winifred Desch collection, private four page paper, n.d.
- 8) *OMI News*, May 1978, Vol. 10, No. 1. San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library. Vertical file: "San Francisco Parks - Brooks Park".
- 9) Alice Lawrie, "Celebrating 15 Years of Working Together", *OMI-NIA newsletter*, January 2004.
- 10) Leslie Goldberg, "OMI: a tale of drugs, urban decay". *San Francisco Examiner*, February 28, 1993, pg. A-1
- 11) 2000 U.S. Census, detail of San Francisco tracts 312, 313, 314.

Thanks to the 2002-2004 interviewees quoted: Winifred Desch, Rita Rivera Doyle, Elaine Ellsworth, Rev. Roland Gordon, John Gross, Maude Furlough, Lonnie Lawson, Agnes Morton, Alex Picar, Patti Poole, Will Reno, Dionne Roberts, Peter Vaernet, Margie Whitnah, Ray Wilson. More of these interviews and other on [www.outsidelands.org](http://www.outsidelands.org).

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