

The San Lorenzo Village

David Bohannon and San Lorenzo Village



David Bohannon, ca. 1946

World War II brought many jobs to California. People moved here from all over the United States to work in shipyards and other war production sites in the region. There were not enough homes and apartments for all these people. Since the factories were open 24 hours a day, sometimes workers on different shifts would rent one room and sleep on the bed in shifts.

David D. Bohannon worked with the U.S. government to create a solution to this problem. He devised a way to use factory methods to build homes quickly and inexpensively. His pre-cutting technique called the "California method" involved setting up a factory on the construction site to cut lumber and assemble it into wall frames. These walls were then moved to each home site, ready to go up. After two small projects in Hillsdale and Sunnyvale, Bohannon was ready to create an entire community. San Lorenzo Village was one of the nations' first planned communities. It was started in 1944, and it originally included rental spaces for rooms for war workers designed into the layout. This changed later on. Bohannon not only decided where the streets would go, but left spaces for schools, parks, stores, and a community center.

Bohannon became a celebrity within the property development community. His "California Method" of assembly line-style home construction was written about in many building industry publications because of its remarkable results: 1,500 San Lorenzo houses were built in 500 days. *Colliers* magazine noted that "for their wartime \$6,000, villagers got a package of house, a shiny new and accessible shopping center, a fine restaurant, movie palace and a round of activities in a social center supplied by the builder." For a "minimum wartime house," it had some unusual luxury touches: a fireplace, tile bathroom floors, linoleum floor in the kitchen and breakfast alcove, and cedar shingles.

Do you live on a street whose name starts with "Via"? If so, you live in Bohannon's San Lorenzo Village. "Via" means Way or Street in Spanish. Many of the streets are named after women, such as Via Julia, or Via Annette.

Eventually, better roads brought more cars. The ability to travel easily to jobs in Oakland allowed more homes to be built on former farmland in San Lorenzo. Traffic lights were installed on Hesperian in the mid 1950s. Freeways were built to accommodate the increased traffic



Aerial view of San Lorenzo Village, ca. 1946

San Lorenzo Village Homes Association

Purchasers of homes in San Lorenzo Village had to agree to abide by rules created by the developer. Most of these rules were designed to maintain the value of the community by not allowing people to let their property become run-down. These covenants are similar to the rules often enforced by condominium homeowner associations today.

However, the original covenants also included restrictions on who was allowed to live there. When the San Lorenzo Village began construction in 1944, the Homeowners Association's original covenants included restrictions on the race of "acceptable" buyers. Under those restrictions, only Caucasians ("whites") were allowed to buy a home within San Lorenzo Village. African-Americans were not.

These restrictive covenants were finally changed in the mid-1990s. Many of the original deeds for all property in the area still have these restrictions written into them, although they are no longer legally enforceable. (Please see earlier section on Population).

Village Post Office

A new post office was built in the Village Shopping Center to accommodate all the new residents.

Postmaster Gertrude Mooney and her assistant Mary Videll were in charge when the first Bohannon homes opened. Suddenly 1,325 new families needed mail service and the two women worked from six in the morning until midnight, seven days a week, in cramped and drafty quarters. Streets have been named after both of these ladies in honor of their heroic efforts.



San Lorenzo Post Office, ca. 1950s

Shopping in San Lorenzo Village

When David Bohannon planned the community of San Lorenzo Village, he included a downtown shopping area. Bohannon development retained ownership of the land and leased out spaces for stores. Since San Lorenzo Village was surrounded by farmland, the downtown area had to provide every type of store and service the new residents could want.



San Lorenzo Village Shopping Center, ca. 1950

Village Recreation

When San Lorenzo Village was planned, Bohannon left spaces among the houses for parks. Tennis courts, playgrounds, and a library were built in 1951 on land donated by the developer. The playground equipment was purchased in 1952. The San Lorenzo Village Community Center was used for parties sponsored by the Village Association.



San Lorenzo Village Community Center, the "Village Hall", ca. 1950s

Little League Ball Park

The San Lorenzo Village Homes Association Board of Directors bought land on Grant Ave for a park. In 1958, the land was leased to the San Lorenzo Little League "whose volunteers built the diamonds, fences, restrooms, and nursed the grass fields before opening day 1959. The rent: \$1.00 a year, an arrangement that lasted some twenty years." (Source: "Brightside," 1979, no author).



Little League players in San Lorenzo, ca. 1950s

Clubs in San Lorenzo

Many Americans joined clubs after World War II, and San Lorenzans were no exception. A Boy's Club started in 1953, and soon had 350 members. The Earl Bowers Memorial Scout Cabin was dedicated 1952. At first it was used by Boy and Girl Scouts, and then the Girl Scouts got their own building, the Ophelia Bohannon building in 1954.

Mervyn's Stores Start in San Lorenzo

Mervin Morris opened his first department store in San Lorenzo in 1948. It was located at 341 Paseo Grande, in the Village Shopping Center, although within a few years he moved to a larger store across the street. By 1960 the store had been expanded 13 times. Over time, more stores were built around the Bay Area, and San Lorenzo served as the distribution center. The Village Shopping Center formed the heart of a new residential area developed by the David D. Bohannon Corporation. Because he controlled the entire center, Bohannon played a vital role in the growth of the first Mervyn's. San Lorenzo residents were, for the most part, blue-collar workers and World War II veterans with young families. Most of them had just purchased their first homes. They wanted value from the merchandise they bought.

Mervin explained in his autobiography *Mervyn's with a "Y"* how his store came to have its unusual name. He had used his first name for his store to distinguish it from his father's Morris Department Store. "I had hired architect Herman Kanner to design the storefront. After reviewing his first sketch, I was surprised to find my name spelled with a "y." Kanner, however, explained that the "y" gave the name a more aesthetically pleasing appearance."

By 2006, Mervyn's had 189 stores in 10 states, and Mervyn's was one of the largest retailers in the United States. Unfortunately, the chain wasn't immune to the economic downturn in 2008, and by the end of the year, Mervyn's had to close down all stores. Many local residents still have fond memories of shopping at Mervyn's.

San Lorenzo Village Today

The San Lorenzo Village today is made up of 5,767 single family homes. The San Lorenzo Village Homes Association governs over the Village homes to ensure that neighborhoods are kept up. The Association has been in place since 1945, and the Association Board is made up of 5 volunteer homeowners. They hold community events such as a Holiday House Decorating Contest and a Halloween Drive-Thru. Some restrictions do still remain on houses in the neighborhood. There are reminders to keep your front yard tidy and the grass mowed, and you need to apply for a permit before repainting or building an addition to your house.



But today, there are no restrictions on who can live in San Lorenzo Village, and it is a thriving and diverse community that reflects its own unique history of the area.