

Oct, 1944

"Invest in Negro Real Estate — Get High Rents and Make No Repairs!"

Landlord's Black Market

Wilbur Johnson

A FAMOUS English lecturer, enroute to the University of Chicago on an "L" train going south from the "Loop" was heard to remark: "I have traveled all over the world, even gone into the filthiest holes of India, but up until now I have never seen anything to equal a London slum. But that, down there, your 'black belt' you call it, is the most unwholesome looking blighted area that I have ever seen or ever want to see. What are you doing about it?"



More than 80 per cent of Chicago's 335,000 Negroes are confined to this "blighted area" less than seven and a half miles long and a mile and a half wide. Here the density of population sometimes reaches 70,000 to the square mile, while the average for the same streets in the white sections is 37,000. Over-crowding leads to promiscuity, crime, rapid communication of disease—especially tuberculosis, scarlet fever and "flu"—and general breakdown of decent family standards.

The buildings which now house most of us Negroes in Chicago are ghastly relics of what were once respectable

homes, some even mansions. A hundred years ago, when there were only forty Negroes in the whole settlement, Chicago had no "Negro problem." But over the years, the gradual restriction, now complete, of the race into the "black belt" has produced a situation so hideous that it is a disgrace to the nation.

Why rehabilitate ramshackle dwellings, put in improvements, repair wiring or roofs, clear out the millions of rats or supply running water for people who have nowhere else to go? Why bother about lowering rents so that these tenants might have something left over with which to make their quarters livable, as long as they cannot go elsewhere?

Why worry about safety devices or complying with the fire department ordinances? In these violations, landlords hold the trump card, namely, having these buildings reclassified as

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"lodging houses."¹ According to an outmoded law, "a lodging house need have only one water closet for every 25 men or every 23 women." This law opens the way for the thousands of "kitchenettes" in the Negro districts, where often there is only one toilet and sink for each floor of a building.

In 1939 the Metropolitan Housing Council discovered that such conditions as the following are typical of these areas:

4008 S. Parkway, 1st floor—One bathroom for 6 families. Water for drinking and cooking comes from this bathroom;

4244 Vincennes—15 people in 5 one-room apartments, among them 6 children; 1 bathroom for all;

67 E. 59th St.—5 families using 1 toilet. One advanced case of pulmonary tuberculosis in this dwelling;

533 Indiana—No toilet facilities; water obtained from neighbors.

A rickety, unsanitary building, called the "mecca" on Chicago's South Side, constructed fifty years ago for housing 600 people, is now inhabited by 1,200.²

A frequent sight in these homes is the milk can used for carrying water for all purposes from the nearest fire hydrant. Curtains instead of walls form the partitions between apartments. When a teacher in a colored school offered a picture to a little boy, he refused it with these poignant words:

"No, thanks. We live in the center 'kitchenette' in our house, and we have no walls, only curtains on all sides."

The "kitchen" in these kitchenettes is usually a fire hazard, constructed in a tiny dark closet. *The Chicago Defender* commenting on a fire in which seven persons were burned to death for lack of a fire escape, made this accusing statement:

"A neglectful city has too long allowed profiteering landlords to place profits above human lives. A none too interested public has been content to make and listen to speeches and do nothing."

Obviously onerous land monopoly is at the root of this problem—which means that, in any corrective program, the absentee landlord is the logical point of attack. The landlord, by virtue of his well entrenched monopoly—buttressed by race prejudice—often collects in rent as much as 50 per cent of the tenant's income. The Department of Public Welfare states that while the white people of Chicago pay on an average from \$20 to \$25 a month for unheated flats, the Negroes pay from \$25 to \$30. For heated apartments, the rentals for whites average from \$55 to \$60, and for us from \$65 to \$70.

These unscrupulous owners are not always individuals—they are often real estate companies, banks, and, shocking to relate, sometimes churches and schools of higher learning. Nor are some Negroes, when they become landlords, above exploiting their own race. That economic maxim, "Men seek to gratify their desires with the least possible exertion," is no respecter of common heritage.

IN FEBRUARY, 1944, Chicago decided that something must be done if the tragedy of race riots is to be avoided and the injustice to minority groups rectified. A conference on race relations, attended by nearly 500 people, was addressed by leaders in politics, industry, labor, social agencies, churches and civic groups. After painstaking investigation, it was concluded that the Negro ghetto, like any ghetto, is a medieval institution which can result only in bad housing and exorbitant rents. An "atmosphere of prejudice," braced by conspiracies—known as covenants—among nearly all white owners of property outside the "black belt," confines the Negro to these areas. The conference voted to oppose such covenants and to change, if possible, the laws, giving them force; it also approved public slum clearance and public housing projects, as well as private ventures in the same direction.

Public housing projects have proved one important fact: The Negro, when given the advantage of improved home environment, reacts in as favorable a manner as does any other racial group. A good example is one of the low-rent housing developments in Harlem, exclusively for Negroes. It is fully occupied and is under the direction of the New York City Housing Authority. On the tenth anniversary of the creation of the Authority, the Harlem Houses was awarded a prize, as the outstanding public housing project in Greater New York. This speaks well

for the families living in these dwellings.

The Ida B. Wells Housing Project, in Chicago, was designed to rent for \$15 per apartment per month, under a program of partial governmental subsidy. It provides accommodation for from 5,000 to 6,000 persons in the \$1,000 to \$1,500 a year income bracket.³

Many of the first tenants arrived with little or no furniture. Pride in their new surroundings—a charming arrangement of multiple unit dwellings built around a small landscaped park—inspired the tenants to live up to their improved environment. Immediately clean, crisp curtains appeared at the windows, hiding the bare rooms beyond. The house manager collected donations of old furniture, and the basement of the community building became a busy workshop, where the tenants turned their hands to carpentry, painting and upholstery, renovating furnishings for their new homes.⁴

The fortunate residents of this development, however, comprise only a small fraction of the 120,000 Chicago Negroes falling within the income level required for admission. The Chicago Housing Authority has made approximately 2,660 family units available for Negro occupancy.⁵ But in spite of this, by 1944 the excess of persons in the black belt, measured by city-wide standards of population density, had increased to an estimated 147,000.⁶

THE LARGER DEGREE of personal free-



EDWARD J. KELLY
MAYOR

CITY OF CHICAGO
WELFARE ADMINISTRATION

208 W. JACKSON BLVD. (S)

G. J. KLUPAR, COMMISSIONER

PLEASE ADDRESS REPLY
ATTENTION OF:

Mrs. E. Perry

October 8, 1943

Chicago Housing Authority
208 S. La Salle Street
Chicago, Illinois

Gentlemen: Attn: Miss Elizabeth Wood

We are anxious to have consideration made for Mrs. [REDACTED] 1227 S. Peoria Avenue, who made application some time ago and who is again applying for an apartment in the Housing Projects, because she and her family are in desperate need of better living conditions. We believe this is an emergency situation.

Mrs. [REDACTED], who is 28 years old, has five children whose ages range from 20 months to 11 years. Mr. [REDACTED], who is in the army, is at present at Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Mich., where he was returned from overseas duty for treatment.

The [REDACTED] family reside in an unheated three-room apartment on the first floor at the rear of an old dilapidated building which is infested with rats. There are large holes in the walls, giving the rats access to the apartment. Rats run around the rooms, on the tables and in beds, day and night.

In May, 1942, the youngest child, then only five months old, was seriously bitten by rats. His nose was bitten completely off, and his whole body was scratched and bruised. His mother awakened at 4:00 a. m. to find him almost smothered by the many rats in his crib. The child was in the Cook County Hospital for several months. Plastic surgery will be necessary, but not possible until he is five years old.

Reproduced above is a portion of a letter that is representative of those accompanying thousands of applications for admission to housing projects.

dom afforded the Negro in New York's Harlem has made it, for him, what Mecca is to the Mohammedan. Here we are not barred from theaters, restaurants, parks or beaches. Harlem has a population of nearly 500,000 living in an area of two and a half square miles.⁷ The district is well provided with parks, recreation centers, playgrounds, churches, theaters, hotels, Y.M.C.A., hospitals, night clubs, and all the conveniences found in cities of comparable size.

There is, however, much poverty in Harlem, and masses of humanity are crowded into ghettos. White reformers shed bitter tears over our plight but they scorn living in the same house with us.

In the higher section of Manhattan is the famous "Sugar Hill," built up with costly dwellings which are occupied by Negro actors and business men with sufficient income to pay the exorbitant rents. Here the population has already outstripped that of Harlem proper, and the overflow is moving west to Broadway adjoining Riverside Drive.

A city-wide Citizen's Committee on Harlem is endeavoring to attract special attention to the congestion there. This congestion results from the fact that in the past twenty-five years Harlem's population has increased 600 per cent, while the area has expanded only 20 blocks north and south and three blocks east and west. This situation is self-explanatory of Harlem's related problems of crime and juvenile delinquency, its bad health record, and

high rate of rejection for military service. No enlightened person supposes that these results are related to the hue of the Negro's skin. They are due to his environment. They occur wherever any population is hemmed in and so restricted in its opportunities.⁸

Every large city has its Harlem. Washington—with 225,000 dark Americans in the city proper—has the highest percentage of Negro population of any large city in the United States; it is the fourth largest Negro city in the world. Here the Negro is showing greater progress than elsewhere, has a large middle class and a steadily growing upper stratum society group which resides in an exclusive suburb of the Nation's Capital. Yet, almost within sight of the Halls of Liberty and Justice, most of the colored families are huddled together in dark alleys, in hovels that were hastily constructed for Negro refugees after the Civil War and which were never intended for permanent homes.⁹ What chance has a child who knows only the miserable life of Porksteak Alley, Coon's Alley, or any of Washington's alleys especially set apart for him?

FREEDOM and opportunity, the twin prizes which the white settlers sought and won in the new world, are still the unrealized dream of the Negro. True, the Civil War gave us, legally at least, limited political rights. We can move from place to place and, in principle, be our own masters. But with this new freedom, came a new responsi-

bility and an aggravation of the "Negro problem." We recognize that it is the duty of all free men to work and to make their own way in competition with others. We know also that racial discrimination has stacked the cards against us and made it impossible for us to compete equally with whites on the basis of merit. We are always the first to be laid off when times are slack and the last to be put back to work as conditions improve.

As long as there is a shortage of workmen and the Negro is not too numerous in any one location, his condition is no worse but certainly no better than that of the lowest class of unskilled white labor. But any unemployment causes antagonism, developing into racial feeling, and the "problem" appears.

To us this problem is personal and acute. Its essentials are: discrimination in industry; partial disbarment from the advantages of education and the pursuance of cultural and recreational activities; and, above all, *usurious rentals and miserable and degrading living conditions.*

Some may say: Let the Negro remain in the South; it is still the most extensive residential area of Negroes. There four out of every five Negro families live in unpainted frame dwellings, built upon poor foundations, without window screens (often without panes), and lacking ordinary conveniences such as kitchen sinks with drains, indoor toilet facilities, bath tubs or showers, lighting, in short, any equipment for the use of running water,

gas or electricity. The houses are usually located on poor land because the better land, by informal agreement of the whites, is not made available to our people for purchase or rental.¹⁰

The American Negro, then, is faced with a struggle for his right to existence, a battle that can be likened to that of our prototype, Joshua—and for the American Negro, too, the *walls must come tumblin' down!* Our walls are the walls that separate man from man because of the color of his skin.

The law of our land and the teachings of all our religions cry out against the injustice of racial discrimination. They decree that some way must be found to eradicate such intolerance. But no program has been proclaimed, even on an experimental basis, which promises any permanent improvement in the situation.

Negro leaders, neither among themselves nor in cooperation with white leaders, have arrived at any generally constructive proposal. The emphasis given to the emotional and sentimental aspects of the situation is justified, but it is allowed to obscure the economic factors which are, after all, the fundamental difficulty.

As in all truly successful human endeavors, the first step toward relief of the abominable Negro housing condition is self-help. Lower rents, better homes, more spacious living, improved schools and adequate playgrounds can be available to the Negro population of any large city if the colored people themselves agree to support by ballot a few simple political and social reforms,

namely:

- 1 Removal of all taxes on property improvements—so as to reduce building costs, encourage repairs and stimulate new housing.
- 2 Modification of building codes—so that houses may be modernized without undue penalty.
- 3 Taxation of all vacant land on the same basis as equally valuable improved land. This would automatically lower the selling price on lots suitable for home building.¹¹
- 4 Assessment and collection for local governmental use of the full amount of ground rent now going into the coffers of absentee landlords, whose interest in Negroes is to exploit them. The landlord is naturally entitled to retain all the rent due him for the use of houses and other improvements, but the ground rent value is not created by him. It belongs to government. When it is so collected, the profit now obtained through taking unfair advantage of Negro segregation will vanish, and the speculators—whether white or black—in Negro properties will have no money incentive in further collusive segregation schemes.

NEGROES are not alone in their suffering from bad housing conditions. Look at the whites who live in tenements and other undesirable habitations! White folks, too, are laboring under the burden of high taxes, unfair assessments, class segregation and economic discrimination.

Just as some white people have learned to appreciate the opportunity for new settlements in an environment ideally suited to their needs—and have built cooperative communities—so we Negroes will find it advantageous to establish ourselves in our own cooperative enterprises. We can have cooperative production, cooperative distribution, cooperative housing, cooperative schooling and cooperative governments, such as are the goal of millions of forward looking Caucasians. There are neither laws nor customs to hinder such undertakings. Only shortsightedness can prevent our developing them. And, in this, as in many other worthy activities, it is only reasonable to predict that, living in modern homes in model communities, we shall be equally capable with the whites in *securing all the freedoms*.

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