

Potters Crossing has disappeared into history

By PAT WUEST

EDISON — There's a shed alongside the Conrail tracks that cross Inman Avenue. Lettered in black, it reads simply "Potter." But the history of the Potters section of Edison is not a simple story.

Until the late 1950s, Potters Crossing was home to most of the township's black families, who lived there in mostly deplorable housing. Today, the township's public housing project is sited on the same site, sharing the same "neighborhood" with custom-built luxury homes, swank townhomes and a trendy new shopping center. The story of Potters is the story of a township's growing embarrassment and, in some corners, a genuine concern over inadequate housing for the poor. It is the history of Edison's public housing policy, a program that has sometimes faltered, a program that was spawned more than 30 years ago.

In 1954, the League of Women Voters of Raritan Township (the township wasn't named Edison until 1954) published a booklet entitled "Know Your Township," an innocent description of the area's history and the township's services. On page 72, Potters is described: "There is one section of the township which poses a serious housing problem to the community. This is Potters Crossing where more than 1,500 persons live, most of them in substandard housing. The section has developed in this manner during the last 10 years without serious effort to enforce building laws."

The League of Women Voters reported that "a special committee to study the problems . . . was set up by the Board of Commissioners, composed of the Building Inspector, the Health Officer and a detective from the Police Department." The committee first hired a township engineer to survey the area, which covered less than two square miles. "Some of the residents were found to be living in homes built on township-owned land, including 'paper' streets," the League of Women Voters wrote.

On December 2, 1954, the then-named Daily Home News reported that the Citizens Housing Committee for Potters (I believe this is the same committee the League of Women Voters referred to in its booklet) was to meet at the Potters Community Center "to discuss problems with delegates from all township organizations."

The following day, the paper reported that "more than 75 persons attended — representatives of PTAs, service clubs, church groups, civic associations, fire companies, political clubs, veteran organizations and women's and men's clubs."

The Home News noted that the first step recommended by the committee was to ask the governing body to include in the upcoming 1955 budget funds to get the new housing authority started on its work. "This body will be authorized to serve also as a slum clearance and redevelopment agency after the Board of Commissioners passes the necessary ordinance at the December 8 meeting."

On December 9, the paper reported the results of that meeting. With Mayor James C. Forgione presiding, the ordinance was adopted. Concern over the slum clearance agency's power to condemn property was expressed, prompting Mrs. Walter McAndrew to respond that that power could be extended "for limited purposes only and only when the land fits the legal definition of a 'blighted' area" which is "spelled out in state law." She added, "The Potters section is the only part of the township that fits the legal definition."

Edison began stricter enforcement of its building and plumbing codes and condemnation of health menaces, such as polluted wells, and elimination of illegal uses of the land, such as the raising of pigs and the operating of stills. Indeed, in a February 24, 1955, story about my husband's grandfather Roland Wuest, who was about to retire from the Edison Township police force, the Daily Home News wrote: "There was

the time Lt. Wuest fell into a buried barrel of fermenting mash during a raid on a still in the Potters section."

Humor aside, the effect of this strong social climate and, to an ever-growing degree, Edison's fledgling political muscle in the 1950s is a legacy that perhaps is best understood when viewed in a more personal light.

The story of Mildred Burns is also the history of Edison's public housing program. Only her story is also a dream unfulfilled — a dream that would enable hard-working people with below-average incomes to own homes and that would structure public housing as a stepping stone to that end.

Mildred Burns was 33 years old when she and her husband left Elkhorn, W.Va., to come to Potters Crossing in 1955. Her husband had been a hand loader in a coal mine and in 1953 coal mining was becoming mechanized. Workers who loaded coal onto carts in the mines found themselves out of work in an area of the country that held few options for other employment.

"We had a lot of kids and my husband had no job," Mildred told me. "My husband had a sister living in Potters and he came here first to look for work."

A few months later, Mildred and her children followed. In 1955, after having lived her entire life in the depressed coal mining region of West Virginia, Mildred was not expecting much of Potters, and its substandard housing was in some ways better than what she had left behind. "There were a few good houses and some not so good," Mildred said. "We had a bathroom here and running water. In West Virginia we had outhouses."

Mildred and her family rented a house at 297 Deal Place. They moved in just as the township's public housing effort was in its infancy. With the creation of the public housing authority, plans were underway to place families in subsidized apartments. In 1958 Potters Crossing was declared a slum area and in 1960 the township began to purchase land for demo-

lition.

These years were also the beginning of Mildred's growing frustration with Edison's public housing situation and of her education from a young, poor mother with little resources to an outspoken, articulate great-grandmother who has become disillusioned with public housing.

In the late 1950's, Mildred said, the people of Potters were not educated about their rights. "Rev. Addison of the Baptist church here and his wife came to tell the people about the apartments. You know, what size apartment would be best for your family, and things like that," she said. "I was one of the first ones to go and fill out an application." In 1963, when the larger units were completed, her family moved into "the projects."

But, Mildred said, it was as if the township had taken care of its problem and then just walked away. There were gaps in information and even broken pro-

misers. "At that time I was not knowledgeable about urban renewal and that we were entitled to displacement monies — relocation funds that would have helped us. We were not properly notified of this. We were just told that urban renewal was coming in."

There was also the more subtle lack of township concern for the problems that are rooted in human dignity and are spawned by public housing. "We were used to a certain lifestyle (in West Virginia and Potters). You were in your own house and you paid the rent," Mildred said. "With public housing (the township) knew every penny you made. You were stripped of privacy."

Then, according to Mildred, the township broke its promise to build single family homes that low-income families could afford — she recalls that they were to cost between \$17,000 and \$22,000. "That never materialized," Mildred said. "The years went on

and, finally, when the homes were built, they cost \$63,000. Poor people could not afford that."

Mildred is 66 years old. She has 49 grandchildren and 26 great-grandchildren. "It is not enough for people to just work hard to be able to get away from subsidized housing. You can't even move from one subsidized unit to another. I'm still in public housing."

Before you reach the conclusion that Mildred Burns is only complaining about a township that, after all, provided her and her family with subsidized housing, perhaps you ought to think again. Just maybe the problem is more deep-rooted and complex than offering decent apartments to needy families. A problem that has been treated at the surface but not at the core.

"This is God's land," Mildred said. "He wants all His children to live here."

Edison Twp. Pub. Library
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—photo by George Pacciello

One of the few tangible remnants of the time in which a portion of North Edison was known as Potters Crossing is this sign on a Conrail utility shed at the Inman Avenue track crossing. In the background is one of the many townhouse developments that are now spread across the north end of the township.