CHAPTER III

MONROVIA'S DIVERSE BEGINNINGS

Although encountering school segregation was a new experience for Almera Romney when she came to Huntington School in 1946, it was not new to Monrovia—or to most other Southern California communities. Monrovia’s unwritten history of racial separation and discrimination was in fact typical of both the era and of California as a whole. While the particulars of its educational history were distinctive, Monrovia reflected Southern California’s continuing struggle to come to terms with an enormously diverse school population. Monrovia, however, unlike many of its newer neighboring communities, included persons of color from its earliest years.

Monrovia’s Origins

The townsite of Monrovia lies approximately twenty miles east and slightly north of downtown Los Angeles, in the northeast quadrant of Los Angeles County.

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The land was originally part of the holdings of the San Gabriel Mission, established by Spanish Franciscan fathers in 1771. The northeastern part of the mission valley was a "vast oak-covered area known since early days as Santa Anita," which sloped on its northern boundaries up into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. The lands that would be incorporated as Monrovia a half-century later came into the United States in 1848 as parts of two ranchos, the Santa Anita and the Azusa de Duarte. The Santa Anita originally belonged to Doña Victoria Bartolomea Comicrabit, a mission-educated descendant of a Gabriellino chieftain, and her Scots-born husband Hugo Reid. In 1841 the Franciscans granted Reid’s request for title to the Santa Anita as "a reward for services rendered for the benefit of this Mission by his wife and her late husband Pablo, who did greatly contribute to the existence of the said Mission." Adjoining the Santa Anita to the east was the Azusa rancho, granted in 1841 to a native Californio, Andrés Duarte, who had served as a soldier for Mexico. Both of the great expanses of sweeping ranchland that would eventually be partly covered by the city of Monrovia, therefore, were originally possessions of indigenous persons of color.


Rancho Santa Anita changed hands several times during the decades after California attained statehood in 1850. In 1875 the colorful mining millionaire Elias J. "Lucky" Baldwin purchased the Santa Anita, which at that time included more than 8,000 acres. Eventually he developed it into a productive, almost self-sufficient showplace of orange groves and vineyards (with an elaborate irrigation system that brought water down from the canyons and up from artesian wells), and a prime stable of Thoroughbred race horses. Baldwin's ranch, and the stream of visitors it attracted, put the San Gabriel Valley on the yet largely-empty Southern California map.\(^5\)

When the Southern California land boom of the 1880s was underway, Baldwin sold several tracts of the northeastern portion of his ranch to developer Nathaniel Carter, who founded the town of Sierra Madre in the mouth of Little Santa Anita Canyon. Working with Carter, Baldwin hoped to cash in on the boom with his own Santa Anita Tract, but he was beaten to the starting gate in 1886 by the founding of Monrovia, on the east side of the Rancho Santa Anita.\(^6\)

Monrovia was named by William N. Monroe, a wealthy railroad builder who came to the San Gabriel Valley in search of a pleasant site for a country home. He bought a total of 210 acres from Baldwin in 1884-1885, and built an ornate wooden


mansion in a grove of native live oak trees for himself and his family. In 1886 Monroe, with three other Los Angeles businessmen as partners, bought more land from Baldwin as well as a parcel of the Rancho Azusa de Duarte, and then laid out the townsite of Monrovia. Business was brisk from the time the lots went on sale in May, and, when the new town filed for incorporation in November 1887 (the fourth city in Los Angeles County, after Los Angeles, Pasadena, and Santa Monica), it already had 500 residents and a bustling main street, Myrtle Avenue, named for Monroe's eldest daughter. In a series of complex deals, Baldwin, Monroe, and associates organized a railroad line that, by 1887, ran east from Los Angeles along the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains, through Pasadena, Rancho Santa Anita, and soon-to-be-Monrovia, to connect with the Santa Fe which was then building towards San Bernardino. Monrovia would soon become "the most successful small boom town of the San Gabriel Valley."9

The boundaries of Rancho Santa Anita and Rancho Azusa de Duarte were originally roughly parallel, running along north-northeast diagonals that followed the natural canyon and water drainage features of the lands from the foothills on the north to the Rancho San Francisquito on the south. However, when Monroe and his

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7 Robinson, Monrovia, n.p.


9 Glenn S. Dumke, The Boom of the Eighties in Southern California (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1944), 79.
associates laid out their subdivision in March 1886, new boundaries were drawn that ran along a straight north/south axis. Thus the land acquired from the Rancho Azusa de Duarte (in the shape of a right triangle) filled out the southeast corner of the Monrovia townsite. It was in this corner of the new town that Monrovia's citizens of color would settle.¹⁰

Monrovia's Early Black History

Precise dates for the origin of Monrovia's black community have not yet been documented, but existing evidence links the arrival of Negroes in the area to Lucky Baldwin and his ranch. Baldwin's biographer Glasscock and other anecdotal sources place the time in the late 1880s, when Baldwin met Negro blacksmith John Isaac Wesley Fisher at a racetrack in St. Louis, Missouri.¹¹ According to black historian W. Sherman Savage, Fisher was working for a St. Louis politician and livery stableman when Baldwin met the "skinny Negro horseshoer whose hands could curve a horseshoe for race horses like those of no other human being." Fisher's employer didn't want to part with him, so Baldwin asked that Fisher himself decide:

Fisher did like Baldwin but he feared the Indians in the far West. When [Baldwin] allayed Fisher's fear of the Indians and offered him twenty-five dollars a month and keep, the boy decided to go. He came west with Baldwin and worked in his stables in San Francisco. When Baldwin came to the San


Gabriel Valley, Fisher moved with him. Baldwin's Derby winners were bred, trained, shod, and cared for by Fisher. This quiet intelligent man became foreman of the huge Rancho Santa Anita employing more than four hundred fifty men.¹²

Sometime thereafter, Baldwin provided Fisher and his family with a shop and house on the rancho's main road.¹³ Glasscock gave this account of what happened next:

A year later, convinced that negroes would make more satisfactory employees on the ranch than the Mexicans and others with whom he was having a great deal of trouble, Baldwin sent Fisher back to South Carolina to bring out a carful of negro field-hands and horse handlers for work at Santa Anita.

"After that," says Fisher, "we not only raised our racehorses, but we raised our own jockeys."¹⁴

Fisher's son Julian, however, puts the date of his father's arrival at the rancho quite a bit later than does Glasscock: "He [John I. W. Fisher] came out, my mother tells me, and interviewed Mr. Baldwin, and the way was made for us to move out here. That was along in 1900." According to Julian Fisher, he was born in 1896 in Denver, where his father had his own blacksmith shop, and he remembered the long,

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¹³ Snider, Baldwin, p. 25. Snider includes in her book Elizabeth Cleminson's "Memory of E.J. Baldwin Ranch, 1889-1890," a map that Cleminson carefully hand-drew when she was in her nineties. Her family moved to the ranch in 1889. The map, which shows the prominent placement of Fisher's blacksmith shop and nearby home, is now in the historical archives of the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum.

¹⁴ Glasscock, Lucky, 238. Glasscock, who gives no sources or attributions, includes several direct quotations from John I. W. Fisher who was still living in the 1930s when Glasscock's book was written.
hot, dusty train journey that he made with his mother Annie out to the ranch. He recalled being impressed that it had its own railroad station.¹⁵

Though the Fishers were among the most colorful of the area’s early residents, they evidently were not the first black family to settle in the vicinity of the Santa Anita. On 17 January 1886, the Los Angeles Herald reported that "E.J. Baldwin has sixty Negroes en route from North Carolina to work on his great ranchos."¹⁶ Julian Fisher recalled that Baldwin employed blacks as jockeys, trainers, exercise boys, coachmen, and laborers, and he remembered other black employees at work on the rancho at the turn of the century.¹⁷ When Baldwin first saw young Julian, he told his mother that he wanted to make "another Isaac Murphy"—a famous Negro jockey of the day who already worked for Baldwin—out of him.¹⁸

Lucky Baldwin’s role in the founding of Monrovia’s black community is described in a variety of ways. Savage claimed that when John Fisher first came to the San Gabriel Valley "there were no cities .... Monrovia, where Fisher lived until his death, was only an oak grove."¹⁹ A 1931 master’s thesis written at the

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¹⁵ Julian Fisher, interview by Phyllis Barrett and Sandy Snider, 4 August 1976, transcript, Los Angeles County Arboretum, Arcadia, CA; "Baldwin Blacksmith’s Son Reviews History," Temple City Sun (August 1976).

¹⁶ Several different Southern states are mentioned in various documents as the source of Baldwin’s original black workers; however, the evidence points to South Carolina as the most probable location.

¹⁷ Snider, Baldwin, 28.


¹⁹ Savage, Westward Movement, 538.
University of Southern California included the following interview with Charles C. Flint, an early black settler in Los Angeles:

"Lucky" Baldwin, the most colorful and picturesque character of the early West, made no distinctions in dealing with his black friends. "Lucky" Baldwin owned the Santa Anita ranch of 10,000 acres and wished only Negroes to work on his ranch. Baldwin went back South and brought three train-car loads of Negroes to care for his "rancho." These Negroes were regarded as his most trusted employees. . . . [They] produced, through their expert knowledge, the very renowned thorough-bred stables of horse and cattle for which the Baldwin "rancho" was famous. From this group of Negroes have come most of the early native black citizens of this community, especially in Monrovia and Duarte. Mr. Baldwin saw that they got a decent start in life. . . . Some of those people, if they had escaped the future white men who cheated them out of their property, would have been among our wealthy citizens. 20

A "white" version of the story from about the same era is included in a 1938 Monrovia history which includes a section on Duarte, the small neighboring town that grew up on Andrés Duarte's old rancho:

In Duarte's real early days there were no negroes, but plenty of Mexicans. "Lucky" Baldwin conceived the idea of bringing a carload of negroes from Mississippi to work at Santa Anita. Whether they became dissatisfied or not is not known, but they soon scattered and Monrovia and Duarte got their share, which multiplied rapidly until they are now quite numerous. 21

Almera Romney heard several of these versions of Monrovia's black history when she became interested in the story of Huntington School's "old-timers" in the


21 Charles F. Davis and Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Norman, History of Monrovia and Duarte: Narrative and Biographical (Monrovia CA: A.H. Cawston, 1938), 118. Earlier the Normans—themselves Duarte pioneers—told of the presence of Indians in Duarte in its early days: "As late as 1882 two little Indian boys were in school here. They learned to write beautifully, but that is about all they could learn" (p. 98).
1940s and 1950s. Julian Fisher, who served for thirty years as a reserve policeman in Monrovia and was often assigned to patrol evening events at Huntington School, became Romney’s friend, and her pupils included many of his grandchildren and other members of the Fisher family. From him she heard the story of his father, Lucky Baldwin’s favorite blacksmith. As Romney told it, Baldwin offered the senior Fisher land enough for his extended family and friends if he would come out and work at Rancho Santa Anita. Because Baldwin did not care to have black families living too close to his estate, he gave Fisher some acres in the far corner of his rancho along the wagon road that became Route 66 (Huntington Drive), in what is now the southeastern portion of Monrovia. This version—similar in some ways to the Normans’ 1938 account—is perpetuated in Duarte’s centennial history:

Most of [the black families] had been brought to Southern California by E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin from Mississippi. He paid their way here in return for their labor on his Rancho Santa Anita. These families, after Baldwin sold his rancho, moved either to Monrovia or Duarte. Those who lived in Monrovia had, for the most part, been given land by Baldwin for services rendered. Those in Duarte had not.22

Since Baldwin did not sell the main portion of Rancho Santa Anita in his lifetime, and after his death in 1909 the ranch continued on under his daughter Anita’s ownership, there appears to be little substantiation for Moore and Watson’s account—especially since Monrovia’s black community was already consolidating in its traditional location.

22 R. Aloysia Moore and Bernice Bozeman Watson, On the Duarte (Duarte CA: City of Duarte, 1976). The Normans are the only other source that mentions Mississippi as the home state of Baldwin’s workers; no other source confirms their information.
by the late 1880s. The connection between Baldwin and Monrovia's early black property-owners, however, remains unclear.

On July 11, 1889, the Monrovia Messenger reported, "The colored people of Monrovia are all moving to one section of town to be near their church."23 That church was the Shiloh African Methodist Episcopal Church, organized in 1886 by the Reverend Henry Hollins and his relatives from Bennettsville, South Carolina, who had come to work on Baldwin's ranch. The members met in one another's homes until one, John B. Adams, bought a lot in Monrovia, and two women, Alice Buckner and Mrs. Duncan Shaw, purchased a small wooden house and had it moved to the property. Members of the Adams family may have been Monrovia's earliest black landowners, at one time owning as much as half a block in the area where the church still stands, on the northwest corner of Canyon (originally Charlotte Avenue) and Huntington Drive (originally Falling Leaf Drive, and for many years, U.S. Route 66).24 By the time Romney first saw the church, the original building had been moved to the back of the lot for use as a social hall and replaced with a larger stucco structure on Canyon Boulevard, directly across the street from Huntington School.

The area around the intersection of Canyon Boulevard and Huntington Drive (to use contemporary names) was not only on the extreme southeast edge of the original Monrovia town plat, it also had several other characteristics that may have determined its status as Monrovia's "colored" neighborhood. From its beginnings the

23 Ostrye, Centennial, 14.

area appears to have included a few Mexican agricultural workers, in addition to its black settlers. (Unlike the adjoining village of Duarte, Monrovia has no records of prior Californio settlement.) The townsite eventually included land to the south of Huntington, not yet divided into blocks, that remained agricultural for many years (eventually used for a small airfield, for industry, and for sand and gravel quarrying). The area was also soon bounded by railroad tracks: the Santa Fe on the south, and the Pacific Electric red cars on the west and north. To the east was mostly-agricultural Duarte, which, in its southern reaches, was even farther on the "wrong side of the tracks" than Monrovia. Significantly, Monrovia's black neighborhood was not located on land that had ever been a part of the Rancho Santa Anita, and therefore it could not have been given to his employees by Lucky Baldwin—although Baldwin was known to have on occasion paid employees in kind and/or in land. Glasscock reported an exchange, perhaps apocryphal, when Baldwin, hard pressed for cash in the depression of the 1890s, offered land instead of wages to John I. W. Fisher, who, according to Glasscock, said no, that he would wait until Baldwin could pay. The Monrovia 1911 City Directory, however, lists John I. W. Fisher's residence and blacksmith shop at 620 East White Oak (now Foothill Boulevard), at what was then Monrovia's northeastern edge—land that would soon become valuable,


26 Glasscock, Lucky, 271.
and that could have been given to Fisher by Baldwin. Ostrye reported what happened next:

J. W. Fisher, the local blacksmith and farrier for Lucky Baldwin, wanted to sell his property on East White Oak for $3,500. An undisclosed buyer wanted the residents of the fashionable Pacific View Tract to contribute $500 toward getting the black man to vacate the premises. They had been trying for years to get Mr. Fisher to move his shop to some other part of the city. He [Fisher] planned to open the shop at the corner of Duarte and Shamrock Avenue.

Monrovia's early city directories confirm that Fisher did indeed move his blacksmith shop from White Oak Avenue to a location near the intersection of Duarte Street (now Royal Oaks Avenue) and Shamrock at some date between 1911 and 1914. The Fisher family then resided for many years on the 400 block of East Maple Street, just one block east of Huntington School. (Several generations of the Adams family lived in the 200 block of East Maple, just to the west of the school.) In the 1920s, J.I.W. Fisher divorced his wife Annie and remarried, settling with his new wife, Cora, in an elegant Queen Anne-style Victorian house that he had moved next door to his new business location in the 800 block of Shamrock Avenue, just north of the Second

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27 Monrovia City Directory, Albert G. Thurston, compiler and manager (Monrovia, CA: 1911), n.p.

28 Ostrye, Centennial, 45. In this case as in most others, Ostrye (who is now deceased) does not cite his source, although it appears from his brief bibliography and this author's cross-checking that his information primarily came from Monrovia's old newspapers.

29 Resident and Classified Business Directory of Monrovia, California (Monrovia CA: T. Whitford in connection with the Monrovia Daily News, 1913-1914), 18F. In this directory, some residents are identified with the unexplained symbols "(c)" and "(m)" immediately following their names, evidently standing for "colored" and "Mexican." Since many residents are also identified by occupation, one can note that most residents of color in Monrovia at this time were employed as household servants, gardeners, maintenance workers, and drivers.
Baptist Church. Meanwhile the Pacific View Tract—south of Foothill on the
eastern edge of town—went on to develop into a substantial, white, middle-class
neighborhood of craftsman-style wooden bungalows which remain little changed to the
present day.

John I.W. Fisher was undoubtedly not the only early citizen of color to be
pressured off land rightfully his and nudged into the less-valuable and increasingly-
segregated area "near their church," as the newspaper euphemistically described.
Charles Flint may have been thinking of Fisher when he spoke to Ervin about "white
men who cheated [Baldwin’s black employees] out of their property." Despite
their "early settler" status, confirmed in the city’s own directories, Monrovia’s first
black and Mexican residents were barely mentioned in Monrovia’s pre-1970 "official"
town history books, which ranged from John Wiley’s 1927 volume through Charles
F. Davis’s several editions to W. W. Robinson’s more carefully-researched
booklet. For example, Wiley’s first recognition of blacks in Monrovia comes in an

30 Stephen R. Baker, Monrovia city historian, helped the author track the history
of the J.I.W. Fisher family with the help of his personal collection of Monrovia
memorabilia. The Fisher home on Shamrock is still in use as a residence.

31 Cf. footnote 18.

32 John L. Wiley, History of Monrovia (Pasadena, CA: Press of Pasadena Star-
News, 1927); Robinson, Monrovia, 1936; Davis and Norman, History of Monrovia
and Duarte, 1938; Charles F. Davis, The Monrovia Blue Book (Monrovia CA:
A.H. Cawston, 1943); Charles F. Davis, Editor-in-Chief, and Ellavera Nelson
Davis, Associate Editor, Monrovia-Duarte Community Book (Monrovia CA: Arthur
entry for the year 1911, when he notes that a city ordinance was passed, which was intended to curb the frivolity of some Mexicans and colored folks, who were accused of dancing at a public dance hall all night Saturday nights, and the reports brought the further disquieting information that the colored people came from a distance and brought liquor with them.\textsuperscript{33}

(Monrovia was, for many years, a staunchly "dry" town.)

\textbf{Life in Black Monrovia}

The everyday life of citizens of color remains unrecorded--except for incidental remarks such as Wiley's--in Monrovia's old histories and newspapers. The Normans, however, give a few glimpses of the racial attitudes and practices of early settlers of both Monrovia and Duarte:

In boom times [1880s] Charles C. Davis subdivided a piece of land in East Duarte, hoping to start a town. Several lots were sold but interest soon died out. It has now resolved itself into a haven for the colored and Mexican population, who are segregated at this place, many of them owning their own small homes. . . "Rocktown" [nickname for what is formally known as the Davis Addition] is really a town by itself. It has its own good school, two little stores, two colored churches, Methodist and Baptist, its own water system, its own street lights, and its own points of contact. The negroes and Mexicans do not mingle socially with the other residents of Duarte, and seem to prefer it so. They often receive help from the welfare organizations, but are really in a class by themselves.\textsuperscript{34}

The Normans' euphemistic account does not mention that the "pretty little village" envisioned by its developer was on rocky, barren ground--the natural floodplain of the

\textsuperscript{33} Wiley, \textit{Monrovia}, 124-125.

\textsuperscript{34} Davis & Norman, \textit{Monrovia and Duarte}, 118-19.
San Gabriel River—and that the subdivision was ravaged by drought and flood even before its plans left the drawing board.\textsuperscript{35} Gladys Singer, a long-time Davis Addition resident, described her family’s move from Monrovia’s black community to Duarte’s “Rocktown” as “an ordeal . . . a terrible wrench,” brought about by Depression-era need.\textsuperscript{36} While Monrovia’s blacks were just as segregated from the life of the white community as Duarte’s, the land occupied by Monrovia’s citizens of color was more fertile and tree-studded, the Pacific Electric street cars ran nearby, and a stable core of lower-middle class black families provided order and a self-contained social life.

Mary Louise Gadbury Carr, a life-long black Monrovian whose family arrived in 1926, remembers the town as it looked then:

I used to love to walk or skate down California [Avenue], at least to Duarte Road, and there were lemon groves on that side, oranges on this side, and the aroma! Oh, it just smelled so good. . . . [There were] avocados down below Duarte Road and above the Santa Fe tracks were walnut groves . . . we never bought walnuts. We’d go down there by the tracks and just pick them up off the ground. And then we had a packing house down here near the Santa Fe station where they would throw what they call “culls” away—oranges that had a blemish on the skin or something. So we’d just go down and take a bag and get oranges and . . . they didn’t bother you and just let you pick them up. . . . A lot of people had their own cows and everything. It was just a scenic, nice little town, and there was no smog. We sat on our front porch at night and you could hear the coyotes howling.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] Carr, Interview, 28 April 1992.
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Throughout the first part of the century growth was gradual for both Monrovia and its minority populations. The 1930 census indicates that Monrovia had the highest percent of black residents to total population—4.2 percent—of any city of over 10,000 in California. The distribution of California's black population would change rapidly in succeeding decades, however; by 1950, the city of Los Angeles was 10.7 percent black, and Pasadena, 9.4 percent, compared to Monrovia's 6.5 percent black population. The 1950 census also reported that only 106 of Monrovia's residents were born in Mexico—almost certainly an inaccurate statistic. Until late in the twentieth century, however, Monrovia's Mexican and Mexican-American population remained quite small.  

Early in its civic life Monrovia's population settled in demographic patterns that would persist for over a century. From its start Monrovia was a multi-class town, with its citizens arranged quite predictably by altitude: working class white on the downhill southwestern quadrant, blacks and Mexicans in the southeast corner, and well-to-do, influential whites on the land sloping up to the foothills along the northern and northeastern edges. In the town's early days, however, large homesteads and citrus orchards covered much of the area, creating a setting much admired by early visitors. Los Angeles historian W. W. Robinson wrote a lyrical description of the town in 1936:

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Today, Monrovia, from its front porch, looks out over the San Gabriel Valley patterned with towns, orange groves and long boulevards, the same valley that once was drowsy with the life of California's pastoral age.

Today, Monrovia, stepping to its back porch, looks up to age-old mountains with their changing colors, shadows and flowing mists...

Good crops and pleasant living spring from the upland that was selected and settled by William N. Monroe.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} Robinson, Monrovia, n.p.