

“Open Secrets” -- Place, Social Responsibility, and the Work of History¹
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In the Summer of 2009, the Studio for Southern California History (Studio) was invited to participate in a unique art installation by Lauren Bon entitled *Strawberry Flag* which took place at the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration and highlighted issues related to the environment, homeless veterans, gardening and ethical issues regarding the value of life. Special thanks go to Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio for providing such an important opportunity and access to an integral and hidden history of Los Angeles. In addition to doing the history of the West LAVA, the Studio provided a history of Los Angeles veteran protest to homelessness in a printed guide, and verbal tours of its history on tours to visitors to *Strawberry Flag*, which occurred in the summer of 2010. This essay is an attempt to understand the history we encountered through this rewarding experience and how to relate it in relationship to current issues facing Los Angeles veterans. We have learned open secrets about power—some that we thought we knew; the most important secret re-learned was about the power of art to convey critical compassion, complex ideas, and foster dialogue.

Artist Lauren Bon, working with her group of collaborators known as the Metabolic Studio, was able to secure a space on the campus and installed *Strawberry Flag* -- a revisionist vision of the American flag as a self-sustaining system. Bon is also an Annenberg Foundation trustee with clear visions of the role of philanthropy and art. Raised at the West Los Angeles VA Hospital in July 2009, *Strawberry Flag* is an artwork in the form of a veterans' program that nurtures reclaimed strawberry plants with an experimental aquaponic system using salvaged water and fish. Veterans tended the flag, measured its growth and worked to create a garden system that enabled them to work and to be affiliated with a shared project in which each person's success was the success of all.

This project went beyond the sculpture and included events connecting the public with the VA including monthly high teas, *Strawberry Sundays* (which are poetry and music happenings), and a print studio where veterans made the newspapers the *Strawberry Gazette* and *Strawberry Bulletin*, silkscreened designs and t-shirts to sell. During the summer of 2010, Bon connected *Strawberry Flag* with an “indexical object” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as part of its EATLACMA garden themed art exhibit. EATLACMA was a yearlong exhibit with the art collective Fallen Fruit with different artists participating through outside installations of plant life and art happenings. In

¹ Sections of this essay paper were originally presented at the national conference for the Organization of American Historians on March 18, 2011 in Houston, Texas and in the *Strawberry Gazette*. Special thanks to Janet Owen Driggs from the Metabolic Studio for her assistance in this work, from its inception to the present.

addition to having a sculpture at LACMA, Bon hosted tours on a Trolley, down Wilshire Boulevard to the West Los Angeles VA.

LACMA's indexical object referenced a section of the *Strawberry Flag* that was organically created by Bobby Shelton, a veteran and expert gardener who works at the weekly Farmers Market at the VA. Named after its creator, "Bobby's ICU" was a care-giving station for strawberry plants in need of extra attention where they either recovered and were returned to the *Flag* as part of the aquaponic structure, or remained until they died, under Bobby's watchful care.

Strawberry Flag used the strawberry as a metaphor for both environmental and veteran history. Strawberries hold a significant role in California's economy but growers follow inefficient models. Although strawberries are a perennial and can produce many harvests, California growers traditionally discard plants after one harvest. Bon's piece drew larger metaphors to how we currently treat our veterans. Southern California counties--San Diego, Orange, Ventura and Los Angeles all harvest strawberries. Strawberry production is important to California's economy. In 2006, the fruit harvest yielded a value of \$1.2 billion, and accounted for 79% of the total U.S. gross sales. Lauren Bon's work with *Strawberry Flag* led her to issue a position paper on the misuse of property and funds at the West LAVA and the 13 empty buildings making up part of the campus.

In doing this research, we discovered a rich history of Los Angeles veterans alongside a diminishing of the perception of veterans in public discourse. This history also revealed concerted efforts by veterans to fight veteran homelessness in the city as early as 1927 to the present. The West Los Angeles Veterans Administration was established by a Congressional order and the original 600 acres making up the campus was donated in 1888 by landholders Arcadia Bandini de Baker and Senator John P. Jones was called the Disabled Soldiers Home. The West Los Angeles Veterans Administration originally provided more than just medical services to Southern California's veterans. Indeed, its original decree called for the creation of a Soldiers Home. However, as this part of the city developed as the bedroom communities for the film industry, property values increase dramatically after the 1920s.

Despite the past productivity and immense size of the Old Soldiers' Home (now known as the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration or VA), veteran homelessness is a returning concern across 20th and early 21st century Los Angeles history. Though housing shortages particularly for low-income communities are representative of larger Los Angeles history, the ever-increasing value of the once 600 now 388 acres comprising the VA complicate the relationship of the veterans to their entitlement to the VA land.² Not only has the VA land been under scrutiny for commercial

² The construction of the state highway, known as the 405 FWY reduced a major portion of the VA property in the 1960s.

development or outright sale since the 1920s, but also veteran access to the facilities has been limited over time. The VA's history incorporates the rise and decline of federal assistance to veterans and provides an exaggerated microcosm of the history of the United States vis à vis its former soldiers. When General Eric Shinseki allocated \$20,000,000 towards homeless housing for veterans in association with the VA's Building 209 in June 2010, the head of Veterans Affairs changed the course of history.³

This history dates to one of the final acts of President Lincoln in creating the Veterans Administration in 1865—then the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War—and the United States Congress' selection of the West Los Angeles site in December 1887. The VA's land was protected from 1888 through the 1940s; Congress set aside funds for the facility and sought to protect its land holdings from enterprising realtors. An increase in funding for veterans was achieved with the passage of the GI Bill (1944) and through presidential platforms designed to create federal support like Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" and Richard Nixon's growth of the federal government. These same programs came under attack with the rise of the New Right in the 1960s and the effort of conservatives to trim the size of the "big" federal government. As an institution dependent upon the outcome of these political wars, the VA has seen the growth of funding and its drastic slashing.

When the post World War II housing crisis became national, attitudes to veterans were expressed repeatedly—in 1946 President Truman beseeched the nation's citizens to share their homes with returning veterans and the nation's religious institutions opened their doors to homeless veterans, and in doing so revealed an orientation towards the nation's veterans that would be drastically altered within 40 years.⁴ Though the VA is the largest campus of its kind in the United States, the last American President to pay an official visit was President McKinley in 1901. Undoubtedly, the foreign and domestic policy of each American president has shaped his reason to not want to visit the VA. In addition to unpopular and undeclared wars like the Vietnam War and the covert US invasion of Cambodia and Laos and later Nicaragua and El Salvador, the national dialogue on the role of government in the lives of Americans had taken on a new direction and presidential attitudes reflected this ambivalence.

Studies at the University of California Los Angeles revealed that veterans comprised nearly half of all homeless people, the criminalization of the poor and the homeless

³ KPCW Wire Services. "\$20M to fund West LA VA housing for homeless veterans." June 28, 2010. KPCW at FM 89.3 at <http://www.scpr.org/news/2010/06/28/20m-fund-west-la-va-housing-homeless-veterans/> accessed on July 26, 2010.

⁴ Associate Press. "Truman Asks Sharing of Houses with Vets." March 1, 1946. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 5.

went hand-in-hand in the 1980s.⁵ In an exposé by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1983, LAPD Chief Darryl Gates commented: “Most of the homeless are ‘drop outs’ who should be jailed and put to work.”⁶ In 1984 President Reagan echoed those sentiments on the television program, *Good Morning America*. The President advised the American public that: “People who are sleeping on the grates...the homeless...are homeless, you might say, by choice.”⁷ In Southern California these explicit attitudes were mirrored in the VA’s neighbors who blocked low-income housing and others who sought the VA’s assets for commercial use—whether that be for filming movies or for holding exclusive corporate events like carnivals on the VA property.

In 1986 former California Governor then United States President Ronald Reagan began an attack on what he deemed “wasteful government” and proposed selling a section of the VA in order to help pay for the VA’s programs. Though the President was thwarted on selling the land to the highest bidders at the time housing developers Kaufman & Braud, other executive decisions were successful in shrinking the government and in so doing, removing carefully designed programs of care for the nation’s former soldiers and amplifying the nation’s veteran homeless population. The history of homeless veterans from the 1980s forward reflects this depreciation of the veteran, with the very recent exception. Often lost or intentionally obscured amidst this story are the homeless veterans themselves and their efforts to solve the problem of homelessness. Thoroughly muddled in years of untidy institutional memory, layers of bureaucracy and political infighting is the history of the once highly productive “Old Soldiers’ Home.”

In its first thirty years, the Soldiers’ Home built a productive farm with an apiary, aviary, chapel, laundry, library, orchards, post office and theater, in addition to barracks, hospital, kitchen and mess halls. The 1916 surplus of peaches and apricots grown at the Home provides a glimpse into the place. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the home produced so much fruit that the orchards opened up to the community of Sawtelle, which created a rush upon the Home.

Men, women and children were scrambling for the fruit, tearing limbs off in their eagerness to get the best and the most. The ground was trampled as though a herd of cattle had stampeded through and the mob seemed bent on the destruction of the place.

Now the gates are locked again—even to the veterans—for one boasted of

⁵ Kevin Roderick. “Better Educated, Younger, skid Row Study Finds New Street People Defy stereotypes.” December 19, 1984. *Los Angeles Times*.

⁶ William Overland. “A Time of Crisis for Our Brothers’ Keepers.” May 1, 1983. *Los Angeles Times*. Pg H1.

⁷ Peter Deier. “Reagan’s Legacy: Homelessness in America.” *Shelter Force Online*. Issue #135, May/June 2004 at <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/135/reagan.html> accessed on July 26, 2010.

having sold 400 pounds of fruit in Sawtelle and others are known to have carted away large quantities. The eight-foot fence around the orchards and the patrol of guards again guarantee safety for the remnants of the big crop.⁸

The needed martial law in peach and apricot orchards is but one example of the place's bounty and its perceived largesse that no doubt increased the land's value in addition to its location in West Los Angeles. It also indicates an interaction with the people of Sawtelle on a basis that welcomed interaction and the sharing of a particularly strong harvest.

The perceived value of VA land and its West Los Angeles neighborhood began within days of Congress' selection of the site. On December 13, 1887 Russell & Baum and other realtors advertised that lots in Ocean Spray (an addition to Santa Monica) were available for sale and merchants should consider setting up shop to cater to the population of former soldiers at lots for \$350 apiece.⁹ However, West Los Angeles remained relatively agrarian until the development of Wilshire Boulevard's "Miracle Mile" in 1921 which re-centered the location of Los Angeles' shopping and banking districts westward from downtown. Its effects were imminent on VA land value, which sat situated on Wilshire Boulevard on the grand street's terminus at the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Monica State Beach.

In 1926 the Los Angeles Board of Realty offered the United States Congress \$1,000,000 for 160 acres of the VA but were stopped by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the VA and veterans serving in Congress who recognized the land was intended for soldiers and that the land was worth much more than \$1,000,000.¹⁰ The land in question was slated for an agricultural school to be affiliated with the newly re-located University of California's Southern Branch (UCLA). Beverly Hills and its outlying communities of Brentwood, Santa Monica and UCLA's Westwood developed in the 1920s and now bordered the VA, making its location among the most attractive for Los Angeles' self-absorbed elite and the services catering to the entertainment industry. In 1928 the *Los Angeles Times* estimated the Home's value in market terms:

This for the benefit of those who daily pass up that soldiers' village as a thing of insignificance—the Pacific branch is the largest in the United States, with a "floating population" of more than 4,000 veterans and a valuation of land and buildings conservatively, very conservatively, set at \$7,219,891. The property is well worth ten times that sum if appraised by a professional.¹¹

⁸ "Soldiers' Home. GUARD PEACHES WITH SHOTGUNS." July 13, 1916. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 15.

⁹ "The Soldiers Home." December 13, 1887. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 6.

¹⁰ "SAWTELLE SITE BILL ATTACKED." June 8, 1926. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 5.

¹¹ "FIRST OF SOLDIERS' HOME IMPROVEMENTS BEGUN. August 12, 1928. *Los Angeles Times*. Page E1.

As a large stakeholder in Los Angeles real estate, the *Los Angeles Times*' estimation of the Home's worth was done by a professional and its detail to the dollar--\$7,219,891—shows the precision the newspaper employed. In 1930 the city of Beverly Hills was deemed the fastest growing community in the United States by the Census and its property values skyrocketed alongside the growth. The property value along Wilshire significantly increased from 1923 when 70 acres at the northwest corner of Wilshire and Robertson sold for \$6,500 per acre. By 1930, businesses near that intersection cost more than \$350,000.¹²

With the rise in value of West Los Angeles land, the use of the VA for veteran use grew in its limitations with the exception of the National Cemetery at the campus—although its 1932 construction came against the vehement protest of local residents. Those against the cemetery voiced an attitude towards the Soldiers' Home and 'desirability.' On June 4, 1932 the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors voted for the 20-acre memorial park but Mrs. Silas Slusher feared her \$200,000 property would become undesirable with its view of the cemetery. Arguing for Slusher, her lawyer Walter Haas contended:

Such a park would make the Slusher property undesirable. This is particularly true of a quasi-military cemetery where salutes are constantly being fired and bugles blown. There are plenty of undeveloped open spaces where the boys can develop such a park as they desire. It is right they should have such a place, but it should be developed in an area that is not already built up with fine homes.¹³

Alongside this financial assault on the economic networks underpinning the VA or housing for homeless veterans came a cultural assault and a criminalization of the poor and the homeless. As the Slusher family may have expressed local attitudes to veterans in 1932, the region's housing crises affecting returning veterans and how the soldiers navigated these struggles revealed others.

Organized efforts to express veteran dissatisfaction with government-provided services began thirty years after the opening of the Soldiers' Home. On March 25, 1921 George Feagan and 600 homeless veterans began a letter writing campaign to prominent Los Angeles businesses to garner funding for some sort of housing for the homeless veterans in Los Angeles. Feagan, a trustee for the proposed fund that would build a hotel or clubhouse for veterans, pleaded to Los Angeles' wealthy elite in an open letter in the *Los Angeles Times*:

We are confronted today with over 4,000 ex-service men in Los Angeles—nearly all ill of body and the entire number ill of heart, for they are not sound men, able to combat life's problems under present conditions. They have no home and are

¹² "Nine Years' Changes at Intersection Illustrated." December 14, 1930. *Los Angeles Times*. Page D3.

¹³ "SOLDIERS' CEMETERY VOTED." June 14, 1932. *Los Angeles Times*. Page A1.

about to believe they have no friends to give them an encouraging word....

These men have done their patriotic duty and now, in their distressed condition, appeal to us to assist them. Our government is doing much and will do more, but necessary delays pending government approval and action is the dividing line—many times—between an upright, law-abiding, useful citizen and an outcast.¹⁴

The appeal for a space for homeless ex-soldiers demonstrates the problem for World War I veterans (despite a vast campus dedicated to the needs of soldiers) and a tradition of agency by veterans to try to solve the problem. From Feagan's 1921 letter writing campaign to Robert Rosebrock's contemporary protests on the neglect of homeless veterans alongside the use of the VA by commercial entities, former soldiers used a variety of strategies and approached diverse factions of power to achieve their aims. Veterans beseeched local Los Angeles businessmen, the federal government, local congressmen and the general public in forms of spontaneous and organized protest. This history shows at once the sense of hopeful despair veterans have expressed in ensuring their own welfare or the welfare of one's brother or sister soldier.

Veterans have practiced resistance to government neglect in manners that reveal a hard earned sense of entitlement to the use of VA facilities and in ways that challenge conventional ideas of law and order. For example, while Feagan's 1921 largely unsuccessful letter writing campaign shows one clearly legitimate way, the 1927 series of arsons of unused properties on the VA by a "firebug" shows another one. Nine cases of arson occur on the VA campus on chiefly unused buildings and resulted in \$200,000 of damage *and* in new federal appropriations towards the building of new barracks and facilities the following year. Although the arson attacks were blamed on unnamed disgruntled veterans who objected to restrictions in liquor policies at the VA, no other fires were reported in the immediate years following the new construction.

Similarly, during the WWII housing and postwar housing shortage, veterans employed innovative ways to shed light to the then national crisis. In November 1945 ex Marine corporal David Mizrahi pitched a tent in Pershing Square in order to call attention to his inability to find housing for himself, his wife and their two-year-old son. The president of Oklahoma based Spartan Aircraft learned of the Mizrahis' fate after reading about it in the local Tulsa paper and provided an executive suite at the upscale Town House Hotel for the family until a trailer arrived from Oklahoma. While Mizrahi only reluctantly accepted staying in the suite—he wanted what was "fair," pitching a tent in the Los Angeles city square demonstrated his exasperation at not finding adequate housing for his wife and infant son.

Instead of being created at the West LA VA campus, throughout 1946 and 1947 thousands of housing units became available for homeless veterans in Southern

¹⁴ Ibid.

California in Burbank, Catalina, Griffith Park and the San Fernando Valley.¹⁵ The reasoning behind the choice to situate returning veterans away from the VA campus is unclear. However, concurrent with this housing crisis was the appreciation of the land adjacent to the VA; its neighborhood attracted an elite clientele that represented wealthy individuals and services connected to entertainment industry.

The VA received homeless housing trailers finally in 1988 after they were rejected elsewhere. In 1987, Los Angeles had to find a new location for 100 trailers intended for homeless people because Councilwoman Joan Milke Flores balked at plans to place most of them at housing projects in her district, and the trailers were added to the VA in 1988 after an initial community protest there. Indeed, when first approached with the idea, Sue Young of the Brentwood Homeowners Association, fought the trailers stating: "We know there is a homeless problem out there, but the Veterans Administration property is not the place to solve it."¹⁶

Not all veteran protests at the VA were peaceful and reflect the hopelessness of those participating in them. The 1981 actions of former Marine Jim Hopkins and the controversy surrounding his death reveal the desperation and strength of those seeking solutions. According to the *Los Angeles Times* on March 14, Hopkins "crashe[d] his jeep through the glass doors and lobby of the Wadsworth VA Hospital" and fired at pictures of then-President Ronald Reagan, "screaming that he [was] not being given the medical care needed and that his brains [were] 'being destroyed by Agent Orange.'"¹⁷ After spending time in the Los Angeles County Jail, he was transferred to a VA inpatient treatment. After his release, Hopkins began an influential lecture series for veterans but Hopkins died suddenly on May 17, 1981 due to unknown causes. The news of his undisclosed death brought action by his supporters.¹⁸

On June 6, 1981 veterans set up camp in the lawn of the Wadsworth Veterans Administration Medical Center to request a meeting with President Reagan; an investigation of James Hopkins' experience at the VA; a broader effort to determine the long-term effects of Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides used in the Vietnam War; and a program to screen Vietnam War veterans for stress-related problems due to their war experiences. Their efforts spurred similar protests across the nation. The hunger strike, which included nurses and a biker group, ended on June 10 when the veterans were evicted. Three months after the demonstration, one participant committed suicide by jumping from the eleventh floor of the Los Angeles Hilton

¹⁵ "FIRST ARMY TRAILERS DELIVERED TO BURBANK." JANUARY 5, 1946. *Los Angeles Times* and "Veteran Housing Gets Another Boost Here." June 18, 1946. *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁶ Sheldon Ito. "Plans to House Homeless on VA Property Dropped." March 17, 1988. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 3.

¹⁷ AROUND THE NATION; Protesting Veterans Vow To Carry On if Evicted. June 9, 1981. *New York Times*. Page A13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Hotel.¹⁹ Throughout the 1980s veterans protested in peaceful hunger strikes geared to retaining support for programs for patients dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, to ones appealed at helping homeless veterans—all with little success. Further compounding the VA's perceived land value were and continue to be its neighboring communities who now take advantage of the VA, instead of recognizing it as a place for former soldiers. At the same time, neighboring communities have fought to keep homeless veterans out.

As the plight of homelessness among American veterans grew dire, the last twenty years have seen a new spate of veteran protests directed at the VA and the VA's neighbors who opposed the building of low income housing and programs aimed at helping veterans. In 1992 veteran John Hurd and others created the United Veteran Legionnaire Corps in order to protest the treatment of homeless veterans. Hurd noted the 20,000 homeless veterans on the streets of Los Angeles were unwelcome in Studio City and Santa Monica—both of which had procedures to remove homeless people from the streets.²⁰

In 2005, the VA Secretary Principi announced a redevelopment of VA land including a state-run veterans home, a residence for families of veterans undergoing medical care and a call for ideas for use of empty VA space, which prompted a new set of controversy regarding the rights to VA property. The most recent and still ongoing protest at the VA has been led by Robert Rosebrock, a corporal clerk and driver for the commanding general at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii in the mid 1960s. In June 2009 Rosebrock began a protest of the VA's "commercialization of the sprawling Wilshire Boulevard medical center's grounds." Rosebrock and his group the Veterans Revolution have displayed upside down flags (a symbol of dire distress to 'life or property') throughout 2009, 2010 and now 2011. He does it each Sunday from 1-4 pm at the corner of Wilshire and San Vincente. Rosebrock's specific objections include the use of the VA facility by nonveteran groups including a private school, bus company and car rental agency, all additions to the VA in the 1990s. Also in contention is the building of a wall using VA funding. The construction of the wall, according to Rosebrock, was done at the behest of the Brentwood Homeowners Association led by Sue Young, who stated her opinions on veteran homelessness and the VA property in 1988.

Last year, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki allocated \$20,000,000 to refurbish some of the empty buildings that were highlighted by *Strawberry Flag*. While many working with homeless veterans find this amount insignificant in terms of the 20,000 homeless

¹⁹ Eric Malnic, Patt Morrison. "Veteran Who Played Role in Protest Leaps to Death." September 16, 1981. *Los Angeles Times*. Page QCA1.

²⁰ Mack Reed. "Veterans Honor Fallen Comrades, Worry Over Future Commemoration: At holiday events honoring those killed in battle, some vets voice concern about dwindling federal aid for health care and a growing homeless population among their ranks." November 12, 1992. *Los Angeles Times*. Page 1.

veterans every night in Los Angeles County. However, this allocation is the first in decades that links the use of the West LAVA property to homeless veterans. Last month, the American Civil Liberties Union launched an investigation into the VA. In letters to VA Secretary Shinseki, the U.S. Department of Justice and California Attorney General Kamala Harris, the ACLU's managing attorney, Peter J. Eliasberg, said the VA was failing to abide by the terms of an 1888 deed that created the West Los Angeles veterans campus.

In March 2011 Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio issued a position paper "Preserving a Home for Veterans" on the current use of the campus. This paper is available through the *Strawberry Gazette's* site, in addition to issues of the *Gazette*, created by the Veterans Print Studio. On June 9, 2011 the American Civil Liberties Union initiated a lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs for misuse of the land comprising the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration.

Open Secrets

Veterans are a neglected group in Los Angeles but are amazing sources of strength, history, and friendship. Although represented in two dimensional ways by popular culture from Tom Brokaw's "greatest generation" to Spielberg's "Band of Brothers," veterans are much more complex and are individuals. Most do not relish telling war stories. Many people have cared about Los Angeles veterans and fought for their rights. The West Los Angeles Veterans Administration began as a "home" and not a "hospital," as it now institutionally has defined itself, despite a campus that is partially leased to local commercial interests and partially empty due to decades of neglect. Money and property values trump the rights of veterans to some Americans, despite a jingoistic rhetoric that makes money for its purveyors that may indicate otherwise.

The work completed as part of this project was extremely relevant in showing how and why we must recover the histories of Southern California. We have learned open secrets about power—some that we thought we knew; the most important secret relearned was about the power of art to convey critical compassion, complex ideas, and foster dialogue. Art may be therapeutic. Art may be political. Conversely, art may be deeply personal and a shared experience. Art invites participation and while never neutral, provides for avenues of exchange among diverse participants. Art also inspires art.