

Port Chicago Isn't There Anymore—But We Still Call It Home

Cover by Patrick Swenson

Ken Rand

Introduction

This is the story about an American town that isn't there anymore. And why it isn't. And why people still call it home.

The town is — or was — called Port Chicago. My hometown.

The tiny, quiet rural community with the unglamorous name once sat on the Suisun Bay south shore about 35 miles northeast of San Francisco, not far in distance but far in spirit from the bustle of the Bay Area urban sprawl. It was born as Bay Point in 1908; it died as Port Chicago in 1968. The population never got above 3,500 or so. Main Street was five blocks long.

It was a working class town with no ritzy section. The town was characterized mostly by modest, well-built, pastel stucco bungalows, or two-story, wood-frame or brick homes along neat, orderly, tree-lined streets tucked behind well-kept fenced lawns, gardens, and orchards.

The men worked eight miles east at U.S. Steel in Pittsburg, or seven miles west at Shell Oil, Phillips Petroleum, or Monsanto Chemical in Martinez, or other bayside industries. Many worked at the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

Or the railroads. Port Chicago was a railroad town. Julie Davis recalls to this day with fondness "the clack clacking of trains and the woo woo from their horns," sounds as pervasive and constant as the wind.

The town had only one elementary school. Bay Point Elementary Principal Harlan Kermit Allen got the PTA to put a pot of beans on the cafeteria table at every lunch. The beans were for youngsters from poor families, but Allen said they were for everyone. No one was shamed.

It was a kids' town. We played outdoors year round without fear. We could go anywhere in town alone and nobody had bike locks or chains. My Mom would send me two blocks downtown to Gus's once a month for a haircut. I'd pay the old Greek a quarter and he'd give me a nickel back so I could go across the street to Lichti's Fountain for an ice cream cone. Every month Lichti got new comics for us kids to browse — quickly, before he caught us and yelled. We loved his phosphates and banana splits.

We fished down at the slough a few hundred feet from the bay, close enough to hear the men on the ships talking. We threw away five carp for every catfish we caught and took home. We caught butterflies, grasshoppers, and frogs in abundance in the fields and ponds around town in jars to take home to amaze our parents.

Kids revered the movie theater, the "used candy store," and the little library that was so small a kid could cross it in three steps. We played on the streets, in the fields and marshes, and at the school playground.

If you started a ball game in a lot across town and had to stop to go home for lunch, you could drop your bats, gloves and balls *right there* and find them undisturbed hours later, or even the next day. And if you had to pee when you were on the other side of town, you simply rang the nearest doorbell.

Where in the world could you do that today?

In the early days, high school students rode the Sacramento Northern train to and from Mt. Diablo High School in Concord three miles south. When Pacifica High and Riverview Intermediate schools were built two miles east in Shore Acres in the mid 1950s, we took the bus to school, loading in front of the theater on Main Street.

Greek, Italian, and other families went to the Catholic Church, and there was the Congregational Church founded by Swedes and Norwegians who followed the timber industry from Minnesota to the West Coast, and the Open Bible Church. One report counted 10 churches in town.

We enjoyed cool, gentle breezes (air conditioners were unheard of), abundant sunshine, good soil, and adequate rain. "Flowers seemed to love the soil there," Julie Davis said. Large backyard and street-side orchards and gardens were bountiful. Everybody grew something. My uncle Bruce Elliott grew the best cherries, the Colchicos had the best apricots, Tommy Robison the best Japanese plums, the Landini family had the best figs, and Otto Lichti had wonderful kumquats. Ming Danno's apples were the most challenging prize and so were all the sweeter. The best-tasting fruits, vegetables, and nuts are those stolen from your neighbors when you're a kid.

Everybody knew everybody and nobody locked doors. You could get credit at Leo's (the real name was Red and White Food Store but we called it Leo's) and order by phone. Old timers might remember Graham's across the street for Leo's. The Food Center delivered groceries in a gray van. We had our milk delivered, and the Peter Wheat Bread man delivered our bread.

They had dances at the Legion Hall every Saturday night. "You could go up there and have a few drinks," Earl Caudill, town postmaster (1957-1968) said, "and walk home and not worry about driving on the road. And if you had more than you should have, someone would take you home."

There were fireman's barbeques, a Women's Club, the Lion's Club, the American Legion, and Easter and Halloween and Fourth of July parades down Main Street. Each year we set up a Christmas tree in the intersection of Main and Minnesota Streets. If you went out of town, neighbors watered your plants; they helped re-roof each other's homes, gave away clippings from their gardens, fruit from their orchards, a fifteen-pound bass from the day's catch.

Marjorie Sincich called it "a caring town."

"When you know everybody in town," Marcia Ravizza said, "there's a special closeness. There is no describing some of the things that went on there, the loving feeling of everybody."

Norman Rockwell might have painted Port Chicago.

From the *Concord Transcript*, August 13, 1969, "Port Chicago was a slice of Americana — a homespun mixture of patriotism and civic pride that is so rare in this era of urban-suburban apathy. It was a P.T.A. town, a chamber of commerce town, a public school and church on the corner, a flag-waving, Fourth of July parade, Star Spangled Banner town.

"There is something that can't be told in terms of dollars and cents — something that the United States government never will understand. Port Chicago wasn't a beautiful town, by any means. The weather was usually too hot or too windy. There was no major industry. It had no spectacular monuments or buildings.

"But it was home."

But Port Chicago isn't there anymore.

To understand why, it's necessary to understand the worth of a deep-water port on the Sacramento River not far inland from San Francisco where large heavily laden ocean-going ships could dock with ease, with highways, railroads and a varied labor pool close by. The combination was vital to industry and commerce in the area. Ships brought Oregon timber to the docks, a critical need after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Grain, coal, and other riches from inland were loaded there. The town enjoyed its share of prosperity in the first third of the 20th century.

The Great Depression hit hard. In 1931, hoping for economic change, townsfolk changed the town name from Bay Point to Port Chicago. Prosperity refused to follow.

Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the nation needed a place to load and ship ammunition to the war zone, needed it quickly. The U.S. Navy looked at Port Chicago, saw the same attributes others had seen, and decided they'd found the right spot.

Nobody in town objected. There was a war on. And after all, it was only "for the duration."

On the night of July 17, 1944, a massive explosion destroyed two ammunition ships docked at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine, killing 320 people, injuring hundreds, damaging every home in

nearby Port Chicago, and causing millions of dollars in damage in the region. It was the worst domestic disaster of World War II.

The ammo dump and docks endangered residents. But after the war, the Navy didn't move, as everyone expected. Instead, in 1955, the Navy began efforts to buy the town to create a buffer zone between its piers and civilian populations.

The town fought back, saying the Navy should move, not the town. A long, frustrating, confusing, and often ugly battle ensued over the town's future. Ironically, both sides often used the same arguments and statistics to promote their cause. The Navy lost its first few bids in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, and at one point, it looked like it had given up.

Then the Vietnam War came.

In 1967, Congress appropriated \$19.8 million to buy a two-mile buffer zone around the piers. Port Chicago was within the zone. The Navy opened a real estate office on Main Street in town and they took homes and property and made everybody leave; the last resident left in late 1969. They bulldozed it all into the ground. They put up a barbed-wire fence and posted no trespassing signs every 100 feet. Now, you can't get within a mile of where the town once stood.

Port Chicago isn't there anymore.

"When you kill a town," Art Chomor said, "you're killing off a living thing. You kill schools, neighborhoods, churches."

But people still call Port Chicago home.

In 1970, eight months after the last resident was forced out, former residents held the first annual Port Chicago Reunion. It's held every summer on the last Saturday in July in Ambrose Park in nearby Bay Point. (Unincorporated West Pittsburg adopted the name Bay Point in 1993. Locals have also called it "Bella Vista" and there's an earlier reference to "Shell Point.") Former Port Chicagoans whose numbers shrink each year, and their families and friends, gather to rejoice in what they had and mourn what they lost. Nobody born after 1969 can say they lived in Port Chicago.

The day must come when nobody at all can. #

The term "Port Chicago" has several meanings. Google up the term and you'll see "Port Chicago explosion," "Port Chicago mutiny," "Port Chicago Naval Magazine," and "Port Chicago National Memorial." You'll find very few references to "Port Chicago, the town."

There are several books at least parenthetically about Port Chicago, the town. The first was *No Share of Glory*, by Robert Pearson, 1964. It focused on the explosion and the black sailors' mutiny. It's out of print; Navy PR man Dan Tikalsky gave me a copy of the spiral-bound typewritten manuscript in 1986.

The book is "riddled with errors," Dr. Robert Allen said in 1982 in *Black Scholar*. For example, "Port Chicago, with a population of less than one thousand souls, nestled in the bosom of the low range of rolling hills that terminated into marsh flats three miles from the river." A page before, Pearson said the explosion was two miles from town.

According to a lawsuit filed in 1968, the downtown business district was a mile and an eighth south of the piers.

(One reason for confusion about how far the town was from the piers is that Main Street ran north to south. The north end of Main Street was about a mile south of the piers while the south end of Main, which terminated at the Port Chicago Highway, also called Division Street in town, was five blocks farther south, or a half mile farther away. Streets also extended another two blocks up the hill south of the highway. So residents lived a mile from the piers — *and* a mile and a half, or more. One reporter, in 1986, said the town was a quarter mile from the piers.)

Pearson played loose with facts, using colorful prose, heavy with adjectives and adverbs; he reproduced conversations he didn't hear and he cited no sources at all.

(Despite my personal misgivings about the book, I did find an intriguing personal connection. Pearson wrote that, a year after the blast, components of one of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan moved by rail through Port Chicago. I used to play on those tracks; I lived two blocks away.)

In 1989, another book appeared. *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Warner Books) by sociologist Dr. Robert Allen presents the blast and mutiny accurately. Dr. Allen's credentials are impeccable and his research rigorous. Heyday Books and the Equal Justice Society reprinted the book in 2006. Dr. Allen still teaches at the University of California Berkeley campus.

(Dr. Allen read an earlier version of this book, correcting my error about how many people died in the 1944 blast. He told me that 320 people died. For many years, most reports used 322 and some used 323 or 324. Hours after the blast, County Sheriff James Long estimated the death toll at 350, with 650 to 800 injured. The Associated Press put the death toll at nearly 400, the *Contra Costa Gazette* estimated 375 to 450 dead, and the *Oakland Tribune* said that at least 1000 were injured. The 322 figure, attributed to Navy sources, emerged before the end of the week.

Dr. Allen said he counted the names listed in the Navy's Court of Inquiry report and found 320. He also found 320 names on a commemorative plaque at Concord Naval Weapons Station. He printed the list in his book. Most newspapers now use 320.)

[*The Last Wave from Port Chicago*](#), by Peter Vogel, appeared in 2001. Vogel's premise is the 1944 explosion was a test of America's infant nuclear weapons technology; an A-bomb was detonated at Port Chicago to test its efficacy.

(You'll see "explosion" and "blast," singular, in reports on the 1944 incident, but most accounts say there were two. Since they were only seconds apart and related, convention has dictated use of the singular. I've stuck to convention.)

Vogel's premise first appeared in print in *Black Scholar* in 1982, two years after he found a document titled "History of 10,000 ton gadget" in a yard sale. A line on the document "Ball of fire mushroom out at 18,000 ft. in typical Port Chicago fashion" stirred his interest, which spiked when he learned about the 1944 explosion and the immediate, intense interest Los Alamos nuclear scientists displayed in the blast.

Vogel's evidence is extensive, rigorously researched, and well documented, but I believe he fails to make his case. No single element of his conspiracy theory can be explained by a nuclear connection exclusively, nobody has come forward to confirm the theory, and there is no precedent for the military deliberately destroying one of its own vital installations in wartime.

(In 1990, the *Napa Sentinel* printed a series contending that while the blast was atomic, it was accidental, not deliberate.)

A fourth book, Dean McLeod's *Images of America: Bay Point* (Arcadia Press, 2005), focuses on the history of the general region with a short but pithy section on Port Chicago. McLeod's *Images of America: Port Chicago* (Arcadia Press, 2007), focuses more specifically on the town. The book is loaded with vintage photographs.

I take only a chapter in this book to move from prehistory to the 1944 explosion. McLeod does the town's early period greater justice, documenting it in considerable detail. McLeod also offers full bibliographic references on his [web page](#).

Film documentaries have also emerged. Steve Talbot's 1980 *Broken Arrow* created a stir in claiming there were nuclear weapons on the base. In 1985, Pittsburg Historical Society historian Marti Aiello produced a documentary focusing on the buyout. There is a short interview of me on it. Several other films, produced between 1990 and 2003 and focused mostly on the explosion and the mutiny, have received or have been nominated for awards, including Emmys.

Finally, Concord historian John Keibel is working on a history of the Concord Naval Weapons Station, "including attention to those who had to make way for the Navy in 1942, 1944, and 1968." His book should provide a meaningful complement to the Port Chicago story.

Pearson is inaccurate and irrelevant, Dr. Allen focuses on the black sailors' mutiny and trial that followed the explosion, and Vogel conducts a thorough diagnosis of the blast itself to support his conspiracy theory — none mentions the buyout more than briefly. McLeod mentions the blast, the mutiny and the buyout in *Images of America: Bay Point* but the reference is brief. His *Images of America: Port Chicago* is the most extensive pictorial account of the town's overall history available.

But this book and McLeod's *Port Chicago Images* differ in several respects. This book is longer and more detailed, focused more on the buyout, has fewer photographs, and it relies more heavily on town residents' personal accounts. McLeod is a historian while I bring 35-plus years as a reporter to the story. More, I have an insider's perspective; I grew up in Port Chicago from 1950 to 1964.

(I've written two booklets about the town to provide additional perspective. [*In Their Own Words: the Port Chicago Letters*](#) reproduces 24 letters that townsfolk wrote to local newspapers during the buyout crisis. [*Dan Colchico: in Defense of Port Chicago*](#) is a transcription of a lengthy telephone interview I conducted with Colchico in 1985 in which he tells the candid story of how he tried to save his community. Both are in print and available from Media Man! Productions.)

I'm biased. I make no apology for it. What happened to Port Chicago — the buyout, not the blast — wasn't an accident or an act of God. As former resident Velda Mattson put it, "The explosion was an accident; what happened in '68 was a crime."

My bias will show in many ways. I highlight the cynicism too many reporters displayed in too many articles, too often more propaganda than fact. I'm sensitive to error and distortion, and I point it out when I see it; I want to get the record straight and I've gone to extraordinary lengths to do so. I capitalize "Navy" out of convention, not deference. Where a distinction may be argued, I use "home" rather than "house." I refuse to hyphenate "Port Chicago."

I use the term "hometown" often. In today's quickie, homogenized, disposable McSociety, the word "hometown" has meaning for fewer people than it did 40 years ago. But someone once said that a people without roots would blow away in the wind. So the story must be recorded — how the town lived, how it died, and how it lives on. This is why we must remember the town of Port Chicago.

Port Chicago isn't there anymore, but it's still home.



This book will be published in July 2008.

[More about Port Chicago](#)

[Home](#)

Updated Wednesday May 14 2008 by [webspinn](#)