

What We Talk About When We Talk About Bayview-Hunters Point

Tom Molanphy



Bayview, San Francisco | [Wikimedia](#)

Land-use decisions, such as where we build our incinerators, burn coal for our power or where we bury our waste, have affected low-income neighborhoods for generations. As we work towards a healthy and sustainable planet, how do we insure it's a healthy and sustainable planet for all?

Land rights, money, race – singularly, each of these issues can be overwhelming. The history of Bayview-Hunters Point, a predominantly black community in southeastern San Francisco, involves all three and more. A close consideration of the history of this American neighborhood reveals the challenges that face a “Green New Deal” being a square deal for all.

The economic peak of Bayview Hunters Point came when the federal government actively recruited black citizens from the south to work on the new shipyards in the lead-up to the United States entry into World War II. This labor force was the powerhouse that built the carriers and destroyers that would win WWII. But some of those ships were exposed to radioactive testing in the Pacific, and like some kind of infected salmon returning home, they were brought back to Bayview and washed down, poisoning the land of their birth and the people who had toiled to create them.

One of the most dramatic and lasting images inextricably linked to Hunter's Bay Point is a ballooning water cloud in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on July 1925, so enormous that the Navy destroyers surrounding the blast resemble bathtub toys. [“Operations Crossroads”](#) discharged two nuclear bombs, one overhead and one underwater, near 240 Navy ships to see, well, what would be left.

According to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, “The results startled U.S. officials. They had expected some contamination but not the near-total poisoning they observed among the assembled cruisers, battleships and aircraft carriers. Navy sailors were sent onto these ships with soap buckets and scrubs to “clean down” the radiation. Pigs that were on board as test animals died, and the sailors’ clothes became highly radioactive.

This intentional detonation of nuclear bombs became the core of ignorance and hubris that would fuel the Cold War for decades. Bayview Hunters Point lost this war game, where admirals and scientists were like boys with magnifying glasses on ants, trying to figure out how much of nature they could fry.

Seventy-nine of the damaged ships were hauled back to Bayview-Hunters Point shipyards, where workers sandblasted surfaces to remove radioactive material. Gilly Jenkins, who took part in cleaning one of the most damaged ships, told NBC Bay Area news the ship was “Hotter than a pistol. It would melt a Geiger counter.”

Hundreds of thousands of gallons of radioactive fuel was simply burned on site. The plan was to sell off the cleaned ships for remediation, but they were so damaged that they were instead hauled out to the nearby Farallon Islands and sunk.

The Navy then set up the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory, or NRDL, on Bayview Hunters Point. Over several decades, the area was used for a wide variety of tests, from giving animals lethal doses of radiation to combining, storing and burning radioactive fuel. Hunters Bay Point was pivotal in WWII, and it would stay pivotal in the Cold War, as world powers decided more and more nuclear bombs could keep the world safer and safer.

There’s almost no way to know how much radioactive material was buried, spilled or burned in Bayview-Hunters Point, so a group of Bayview residents filed a \$27 billion class action lawsuit in May of 2018 against the cleanup contractor Tetra Tech.

The Navy claimed only 91 out 882 locations were contaminated during decades of testing and experimentation, so the Navy only tested those sites. “You trust the Navy and I don’t,” Jenkins told *The San Francisco Chronicle*. “I would check it all.”

The most complete documentation of what went on was the Navy's own 665-page report released in 2004, the Historical Radiological Assessment. Sections of the report highlighted by *The San Francisco Chronicle* concerning the testing on animals are not reassuring, to say the least.

"According to one former worker who was interviewed for the assessment, the radioactive carcasses of large mammals were sometimes cut up with axes, the parts stuffed into 55-gallon drums for burial at sea or in the landfill. One lab building next to Parcel A contained a room full of caged dogs given lethal doses of radiation, the report says. The dogs bled and defecated in their cages, clogging the drains with radioactive excrement until the floor was covered in 6 inches of water."

Greenaction, a "multiracial grassroots organization that fights for health and environmental justice," has been involved in the fight over Bayview-Hunters Point for decades.

"There's a wide range of health and justice issues, but in many ways it's business as usual," Bradley Angel, Executive Director of Greenaction, told me by phone. "In Bayview-Hunters Point, we know that city, state and federal governments knew that Tetra Tech had ignored fraud. Tetra Tech is not being held responsible."

The history, analysis and questions around land, money and race in Bayview-Hunters Point are mesmerizing and disturbing. For the residents of Bayview-Hunters Point, though, asking questions and discussing history is not enough. They need action.

Two pivotal actions - what we do with our waste and where and how we generate our power - must be re-considered if we're serious about having a healthy and sustainable planet for all. The tradition of either burning or burying our waste - and doing both near low-income communities - must be stopped as our population and consumption climbs.

Because, just like the truth of what happened to the community of Bayview-Hunters Point, waste doesn't disappear when it's buried. Eventually, it will be uncovered.

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