

Moving Day

By Jim Simmon

published: June 20, 1996

By 9:30 a.m., workers from Foster Fence Company had staked the perimeter of Allen Parkway Village with posts, and a few hours later, the front of the project was entirely cordoned off by shiny new chainlink. A crew from A-Rocket Moving -- all black men -- was idling under a shade tree, waiting for the call to begin moving the belongings of the remaining nine households in APV. If they had any misgivings about the political correctness of their assignment, they weren't letting on. "It's just a lot of work for us," shrugged one mover.

And it was. Some of the poor people left at Allen Parkway had a lot of possessions crammed into those small apartments. There were TVs and stereos to move, air conditioners to unbolt from window frames, a large rusty freezer to wrestle up the ramp into a van.

By 10:30, there probably were more white people at APV than there had been since shortly after whenever they fully desegregated the project. Most of the them were cops and media types, but there were also some federal marshals outside of the perimeter and an ad hoc assemblage of relatively quiescent protesters on the premises. The cops were there to help the marshals, who ostensibly were in charge of carrying out U.S. District Judge David Hittner's order that the project be vacated by high noon on July 12, although the cops appeared to be in charge. The media, of course, were on hand to record the last meaningful stroke in a struggle that's occupied the councils of power in Houston on and off for almost two decades. HPD had arranged for a couple of selected cameramen to remain for "pool" footage after Hittner's deadline, so it went without saying that the day held the potential for some sensational, gut-wrenching video of the bulls wading in to roust the noble tenants -- Steinbeck as shot by John Ford for the evening's top story on Channel 2.

But this is Houston. By 11, the moving men were drenched, and most of the cops and media people had taken refuge under the abundant shade trees, one of the many natural features that make the site of Allen Parkway Village such an appealing landscape, even when covered by 1,000 decaying units of World War II-era public housing. Almost all of the tenants were in the final stages of moving.

On the western edge of the project, one woman admonished her teenage son to step lively. "Come get all that shit off the floor in there," she said. "At 12 o'clock, you can't come back and get that shit." The kid hustled inside and began toting out his shit.

Hittner's order held that anybody still on the APV grounds after noon could be held in contempt. "We've got our golf shirts on today," explained one of the casually dressed marshals. "Come noon, we're playing through." He didn't seem to be watching the clock that closely.

By 12:30, the cops had brought a large water cooler to the APV community center, where the media had been herded after Hittner's order took effect. A short while later, the ceremonial press conferences began, one after another, with a procession of speakers -- Police Chief Sam Nuchia, Houston Authority executive director Joy Fitzgerald, the head of the local HUD office, etc. -- all declaring that the Siege of Allen Parkway Village had been peaceably concluded. There were no casualties, not even a raised voice, unless you count the testy exchanges between the movers.

Jew Don Boney, who spent part of the morning helping smooth the transfer of the tenants into their new homes, proclaimed the day "simply the turning of a chapter in a long book," and that caught it about right. The councilman seemed to suggest that tenants' leader Lenwood Johnson might justifiably declare a victory of sorts, given that early proposals to raze the project completely had given way to a plan to preserve and renovate about 280 of the apartments.

It was difficult to tell whether the tenants' leader shared that sentiment, but shortly after 1:30, when he had finished saying his piece before the microphones, Lenwood Johnson threw an arm around Boney and smiled broadly, and genuinely. It wasn't exactly a gesture of triumph, though; it was more like a smile of relief and exhaustion by a man who was finally letting go after holding his breath for 15 years.

By nightfall, all the tenants were gone, and the Housing Authority padlocked the front gate. As everybody noted, the shuttering of APV was nothing if not anticlimactic.

Johnson, naturally, didn't go easily, nor till the last minute. He spent much of the morning working the phone inside his small apartment, amid the stacked and strewn papers he had accumulated in his years of legal maneuvers to save the project. One supporter arrived with a do-it-yourself bankruptcy kit and the suggestion that Johnson and another tenant could file for bankruptcy, thus staving off their evictions. It made you wonder what the monastic Johnson might list as his assets on a bankruptcy petition, but in any case, that strategy was abandoned, as was the idea that Johnson would hang around to be arrested, which might make him ineligible for future habitation of public housing.

He promised to continue his fight from his new apartment, but when Johnson left under his own power, APV really became history.

The other residents departed with varying degrees of acquiescence, perhaps in recognition that one of the drawbacks of living in a government subsidized apartment is that you have to go where the government wants you to go. That certainly would not have been a fashionable idea among the protesters at the closing of APV, an occasion that seemed to attract everyone with any sort of free-floating grievance in need of an audience.

Courthouse camper Phrogge Simons leaned over the fence on the West Dallas side of the project to hector the cops, who, she hollered, might be better employed finding out who shot Alan Mabry in the head. Next to her, a black man with a booming voice loudly opined that Bob Lanier had run Bud Adams out of town and now he was doing the same to Lenwood Johnson, an equation I don't think I would have made if I'd stood in the direct sun for the remainder of the day. James Partsch Galvan, the perennial mayoral candidate and frequent haranguer of City Council, made the obligatory appearance after cussing councilmembers for their subservience to "white trash Lanier." Galvan moved a few of Johnson's files, then exercised his First Amendment rights by painting a Lanier-related obscenity on the back of his "Italia '94 World Cup" T-Shirt. It was rumored that a local citizens militia leader had come to the scene, perhaps in anticipation of another Waco or Ruby Ridge.

Then there were the punkish and body-pierced squatters, who must have been hard at work in the previous days painting the project with various crypto-revolutionary slogans. Yes, there was revolution in the air, and colorful nose-ringed characters with seriously considered opinions they were eager to share. One white woman who accompanied Johnson early in the morning sported a "Mao More Than Ever" T-shirt. (Now there was a mass murderer who would've known how to clear out a public housing project.) Even Johnson, whom you would assume knows better, indulged in some sloganeering early in the day, before easing on down the road. "They're treating us the same way they treated people in Iraq, in Grenada, in Panama," he declared.

Nah, sorry, that's not the way it went down. Of all the crimes, large and small, that were perpetrated on Allen Parkway Village in the years since it was informally and then officially decreed that the perfectly solid structures should be razed to make way for private development, the day the place was finally closed was not among them.

It struck me how empty the cant and the paint-by-numbers sentimentality of much of the media coverage was as I watched the Housing Authority, in the person of Fitzgerald, bend over backward to accommodate the wishes of one of the last APV tenants to leave. The authority had arranged for Mary Pruitt and her brood to move into a four-bedroom unit at Clayton Homes, but, as Pruitt explained, "I don't like Clayton Homes," a disinclination that had something to do with the alleged presence of a variety of pests and the railroad tracks that run behind that project.

So, with the clock approaching 12, Fitzgerald first bummed a cigarette from Pruitt, found a light, then retired with her cellular phone to a nearby stoop and began ringing up her office to see whether another four bedroom apartment could be found for Pruitt. There seemed to be some difficulty to that end, but Fitzgerald kept dialing and talking. For the first time, I sensed the faintest bit of tension. Boney had a smoke, too. The noon deadline passed, but it was obvious by then that the marshals weren't going to come charging up the courtyard. I watched Fitzgerald work her phone a little longer, then wandered off, not wanting to be arrested for standing under a tree and watching one side of a phone conversation.

On the way out, I inventoried some of what was left behind at APV: a brush with a large clump of hair in its bristles, several old copies of National Geographic, enough redeemable aluminum cans to fund an appetizer at Tony's for at least one of the squatters, a poster of the Sex Pistols in their safety-pin-through-the-cheek heyday incongruously taped to a boarded-up doorway across from Johnson's apartment; the rusty carcass of a 1950-something Ford Crown Victoria propped on makeshift blocks. And wherever life had remained at the project, there were gardens, thriving with cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes and squash, and vegetables from Vietnam whose names don't readily translate.

Earlier, I had watched as an elderly Vietnamese woman took a butcher knife and began cutting away leafy green vegetables that she methodically stuffed into a white garbage bag. Around the corner, Tuan Bui was helping his parents load their furniture. They had tended an especially intricate garden that stretched over the fronts of five or six units and was terraced for irrigation. The bounty would be left to wither in this summer's especially fierce sun.

"Obviously, you can't move land," Tuan said.

But somebody did get away with a bit of earth from APV. It was clinging to the roots of a nice-sized Chinese Plum tree that the tenants in No. 858 had dug up and which reclined near the van that would soon be hauling their possessions to Clayton Homes. "My sister planted that three years ago, the same year my little nephew was born," explained one of the women. She was a niece of Ola Mae House, the mother of Freedmen's Town Association's Gladys and ten others, who had positioned herself atop a plastic milk crate on the tiny front porch while the movers loaded up.

"We are going to eat Chinese plums next year," said Mrs. House.

She was kidding, of course. But the tree was gone by day's end.