

HOMEWORK: "A Neighborhood Vote"

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A NEIGHBORHOOD VOTE

February 17, 1952
San Francisco

Residents of the Southwood District of South San Francisco were triumphant yesterday in their efforts to keep their neighborhood 100 per cent Caucasian.

They achieved this object by the use of one of democracy's most fundamental instruments—the secret ballot.

By a vote of 174 to 26 they told Sing Sheng, a former Chinese Nationalist intelligence officer, that they did not want him, his pretty wife and his small son as neighbors.

They did not want the Shengs as neighbors for a lot of reasons which added up to one big reason: the Shengs are Chinese.

The ballots were counted in a garage in the neighborhood. The long narrow building was crowded with some 100 homeowners and spectators.

Sheng, a young man of 25, dressed in a double-breasted blue suit, sat at the balloting table. His Chinese-American wife sat in the front row. She is pregnant. Her baby is due to be born February 22, Washington's birthday.

The suggestion of putting the matter to a ballot came from Sheng himself after he received numerous objections to his purchase of a house on West Orange Avenue last week. Most of the objections asserted that his presence would depress property values.

"I didn't know about any race prejudice at all until I came to Southwood. I was sure everybody really believed in democracy, so I thought up this vote as a test," he said at that time.

Before the counting of ballots began, Edward Howden, executive director of the San Francisco Council for Civil Unity, told the assembled homeowners he had learned of a scientific study recently made in the Bay Area analyzing the actual effect of non-Caucasian residents on property values. He asked if the group wanted to postpone counting the ballots until they had a chance to consider and discuss this study.

Voices from the back of the garage shouted this down:

"Let's get on with it. Let's not fool around any more."

Each ballot was tallied aloud, read by South San Francisco City Manager Emmons McClung. The ballots were phrased so that the homeowners were asked whether they objected to the purchase of a home in the neighborhood by this Chinese family.

The Shengs heard McClung read the phrase, "I object," 174 times as he tallied the ballots. By the end of the balloting they looked crushed.

A silence followed the final tally. Then Sheng stood up and let it be known that he would abide by the vote.

"We'll have to sell the furniture we bought and go somewhere else to live. I hope you people will be happy in your community and that your property values will increase every day."

The meeting broke up. The homeowners exchanged jubilant remarks as they drifted out of the hall.

Many of them were articulate to this reporter about their reasons for

“Neighborhood Vote” continued:

not wanting the Shengs in their district, but not one would permit his name to be quoted in connection with these explanations.

“What do you want to do, put me on the spot?” one of them demanded.

The homeowners were indignant at *The Chronicle* for reporting the story in the first place.

“We have a quiet, respectable neighborhood here and we don’t care for publicity,” one said.

If Sheng had wished, he could have ignored the vote and insisted on his legal right to move into the house. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled “restrictive covenant” agreements unconstitutional.

Despite this ruling, the American Homes Development Company of Burlingame—describing itself as “developers of this representative American residential area”—sent a letter to all homeowners in Southwood last week urging them to hold fast to the principle of restrictive covenants in their housing transactions.

“These covenants set forth salutary and beneficial restrictions on the land for those purchasers desiring ownership in a community where they could welcome their neighbor and live in equality.”

The Shengs also wrote a letter to the Southwood homeowners before the balloting. It read:

“We wish to express our gratitude for the interest you showed in the welfare of our purchasing the house at 726 W. Orange Avenue.

“Before you reach any decision as to how you will vote in the ballot, allow us to tell you our opinion. The present world conflict is not between individual nations, but between Communism and Democracy. We think so highly of Democracy because it offers freedom and equality. America’s forefathers fought for these principles and won the Independence of 1776.

“We have forsaken our beloved China and have come to this country seeking the same basic rights. Do not make us the victims of false Democracy. Please vote in favor of us.”

Southwood’s homes are in the \$10,000 to \$12,000 price range. Of the 253 homeowners eligible to vote, 31 did not return ballots and 14 expressed themselves as having no opinion in the matter. Six ballots were void.

The owner of the house, Jack Denson, said after the meeting he would return Sheng’s \$2,950 down payment. The Densons said they had been subject to “considerable pressure” ever since the sale to the Shengs was announced.

“We were given to understand that if the sale went through people

would see to it that we would have a hard time buying another piece of property anywhere on the Peninsula,” Mrs. Denson said.

Sheng came to the United States in 1947, intending to study for the diplomatic service. When the Communists took over China, he decided to stay in this country. He is employed as an airline mechanic. He and his family live in an apartment in colorful—but congested—Chinatown, at 47 Eagle Avenue.

This week the Shengs will resume their efforts to find a home. They hope to meet with better success, because this is Brotherhood Week.

Reading Questions:

1. What happened on Feb. 17th, 1952 in the garage of a San Francisco, CA neighborhood?
2. What objections did residents make to Sheng purchasing a home in the neighborhood? Why do you think that they did not want him to live there?
3. What was the impact of hearing 174 votes of “I object” read aloud? How did the Shengs respond to the news?
4. Under U.S. law, the Shengs had a legal right to live there. The U.S. Supreme Court had previously ruled that “restrictive covenants” were illegal.
 - a. What do you think a “restrictive covenant” is? DEFINE the term.
5. Why do you think the Shengs wrote a letter to the residents of the community before the vote? What were they trying to do with the letter?
6. What kind of “pressure” did the owners of the house, the Densons, experience after announcing that they would sell their home to the Shengs? What threat did residents make to ensure that they backed out on the sale?