

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY BETWEEN 1930 AND 1964

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Peripheral expansion in the form of low-density living areas is a trait commonly associated with most cities in the United States at the present time. Growth of this type, often referred to as "suburbanization," has taken place on a large scale in the Los Angeles area since World War II, and, consequently, several locales within that vast urban region afford excellent opportunities for the examination of various landscape sequences which mark the change from rural to urban. In this inquiry an attempt is made to consider a succession of landscapes which have developed within the San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles between 1930 and 1964. During that period the valley evolved from an area of intensive field and orchard agriculture to a functional and morphological extension of the rapidly expanding urban-industrial nucleus of Los Angeles.

This study is based upon an analysis made from population distribution maps, developed from Federal Census and local planning statistics, and land use maps, based mainly on air-photographs and field-observations. Such maps were created in an attempted reconstruction of the cultural landscape of the San Fernando Valley approximately as it was in 1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, and 1960, and provide the point of departure for the following description and analysis of changes in population and land utilization.

BACKGROUND

An outlier of the Los Angeles lowland, the San Fernando Valley is located 12 to 15 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. It is almost completely enclosed by mountains and embraces approximately 235 square miles. The valley floor is quite flat and is practically all suitable for intensive development. Also, it is crossed by major inland and coastal connections between Los Angeles and central and northern California. Therefore, because of proximity to central Los Angeles, the inviting nature of its physical setting, and the presence of major routeways, the San Fernando Valley has for many years attracted the attention of man as a site for agricultural and urban settlement. In fact, its evolution reflects every major cultural stage in history of southern California.¹ Attention, here, however, will be given only to a segment of this development, namely, that of the past three decades. For it was the period since 1930 which witnessed the valley's transformation from rural to urban.

¹ Frank M. Keefer, *History of San Fernando Valley* (Glendale: Stillman Printing Co., 1934), pp. 9-115.

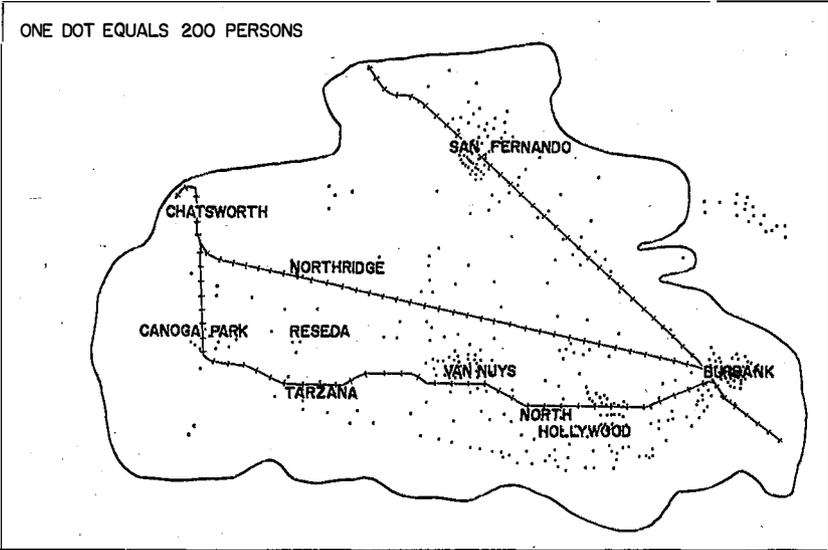


Figure 1. Population distribution, 1930. Source: Map prepared by the Los Angeles City Planning Department, January, 1942.

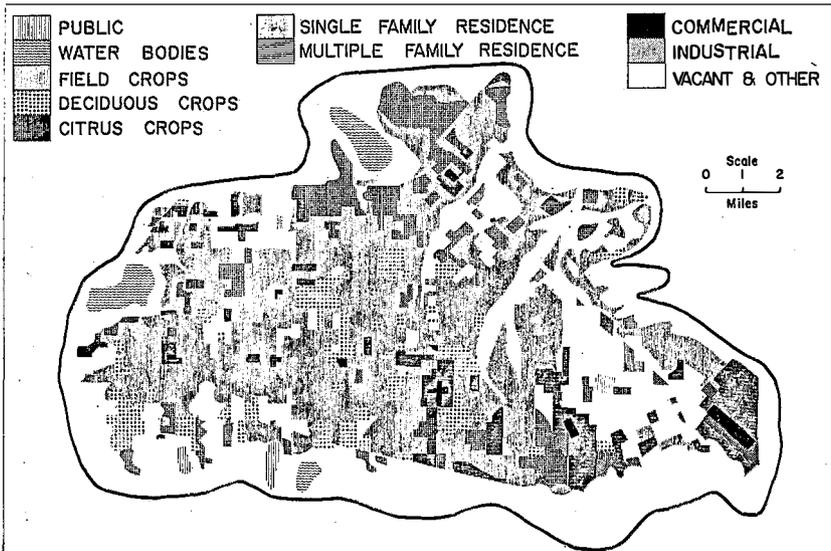


Figure 2. Land use, 1928. Source: Fairchild Aerial Surveys Inc. Air photographs of the San Fernando Valley taken during May, 1928.

THE 1930's

The 1920's marked the end of a momentous era in valley history, an era which began around 1910 and included: (1) annexation of most of the area by the city of Los Angeles; (2) initiation of intensive agriculture based on large-scale irrigation; (3) establishment of widespread subdivision and community building, and (4) an increase in population from approximately 20,000 in 1920 to 78,479 in 1930.² All of these events were associated in some way with the expectation and realization of abundant water, and all played major roles in shaping the present cultural landscape.

During the 1930's the economy was overwhelmingly agricultural, and settlements were concentrated in the east and southeast where four towns had developed: San Fernando, Burbank, Van Nuys, and North Hollywood (Figures 1 and 2). Each functioned primarily as a market center for surrounding farming areas, and was characterized by a small commercial nucleus encircled by a limited area of subdivided land. San Fernando and Van Nuys also served as the principal service centers for the agricultural west valley, where only scattered farming communities existed. Even there, however, new communities were beginning to provide services and to attract population, for example, Canoga Park, Chatsworth, Reseda, and Tarzana.³

The valley's overall land use pattern had three outstanding aspects: field crops, fruit and nuts, and dairy and poultry raising.⁴ Field crops such as alfalfa and beans, plus miscellaneous truck products, were dominant areally and were concentrated in the central and west valley. Citrus holdings were concentrated in the north and northeast, with lesser plantings in the west. Most groves were situated on relatively frost-free ground, were owner-operated, and consisted of tracts of 10 to 15 acres. North of San Fernando considerable acreage was devoted to olives, deciduous fruit and walnut trees were distributed over the valley floor, and poultry raising and dairy farming were concentrated in the west.

Industrial activity prior to World War II may be summarized by three terms: agricultural processing, motion pictures, and Burbank. Agricultural processing industries developed in most of the small towns and handled crops produced locally; centers with rail access usually

² Population figures cited in this study are based on the following sources: 1920, estimate prepared by the Los Angeles City Planning Department; 1930, United States Bureau of the Census; 1940, United States Bureau of the Census; 1945, estimate prepared by the Los Angeles Regional Planning Commission; 1950, United States Bureau of the Census; 1955, estimate prepared by the Research Department of Security First National Bank; 1960, United States Bureau of the Census; and, 1964, estimates prepared by the City Planning Departments of Los Angeles, San Fernando, and Burbank.

³ Paul A. Ewing, *The Agricultural Situation in San Fernando Valley, California* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1939), p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48; Lewis H. Height, "Settlement Patterns in San Fernando Valley" (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1953), pp. 92-99.

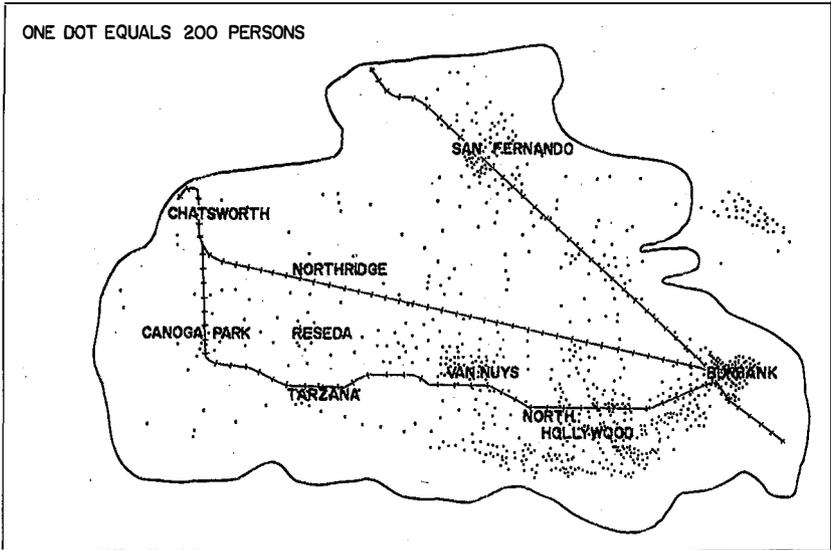


Figure 3. Population distribution, 1940. Source: Map prepared by the Los Angeles City Planning Department, January, 1942.

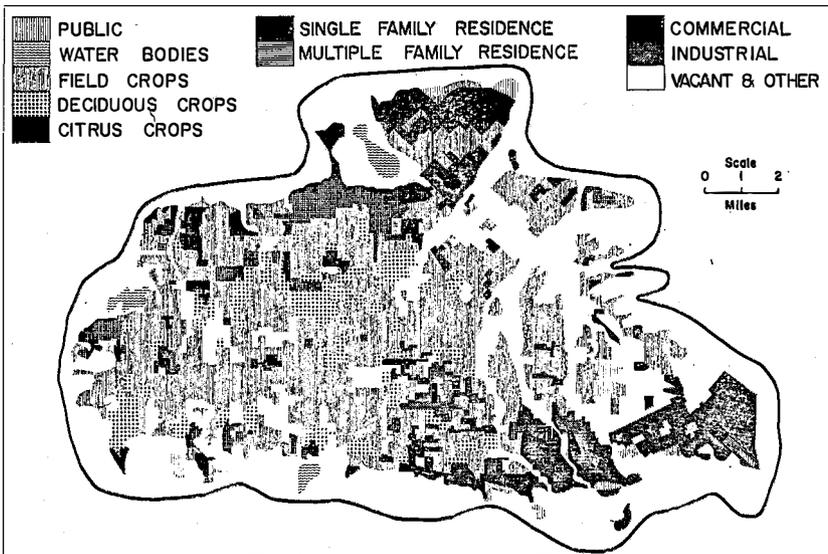


Figure 4. Land use, 1938. Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Air photographs of the San Fernando Valley taken during June, July, and August, 1938.

developed shipping facilities near the plants. With the spread of town-building in the southeast during the 1930's these industries began to disappear, and their total elimination proceeded rapidly after World War II. The motion picture industry was attracted by the presence of large tracts of cheap land, a very high proportion of sunny days, and a variety of natural settings. This industry expanded rapidly in the southeast between 1915 and 1930, and has been important ever since. By 1917, the outstanding activity in Burbank was manufacturing. With an emphasis upon aircraft and motion picture production, it was the only valley town which was industrialized prior to the Second World War.

The decade of the 1930's ushered in a period of stepped-up settlement, an era still in its heyday. The increasing use of the automobile, the construction of fairly good highways, and the presence of abundant land for a reasonable price all were important factors. Such development was especially evident in the southeast, where proximity to the Hollywood section of Los Angeles fostered unmistakable signs of suburbanization. The west valley, however, remained much the same as in the 1920's as distance proved detrimental to conditions other than agricultural. The general significance of building during the 1930's may be summarized by the fact that 56 per cent of the housing present in the valley in 1940 was constructed during the previous decade.⁵

THE 1940's

By 1940 the population of the San Fernando Valley had increased to 155,443, an addition of approximately 77,000 since 1930. Even so, the pattern of settlement and land utilization was basically the same as in the early 1930's (Figures 3 and 4). The greatest area of change was the southeast, where the once-independent urban nuclei were beginning to coalesce, and where significant development was beginning to project westward along major streets. Although settlement thinned-out rapidly toward the west, the new communities located there were nevertheless attracting population, especially Canoga Park, Reseda, and Tarzana.

During World War II the valley's economy continued to be dominated by agriculture, which was concentrated in the western section. There, a large expanse of land stretching from the built-up east to Canoga Park was devoted mainly to general field crops. Scattered throughout this area were orchards, citrus and olives in the north, and walnuts and deciduous fruit in the west and south. Livestock ranching was limited, and generally involved breeding rather than large-scale animal production. In the urbanizing southeast only truck gardens and an occasional orchard remained in operation; however, large tracts of land once used for agriculture stood vacant, awaiting conversion to urban uses.

By the end of the Second World War, Southern California (especially Los Angeles) was, and still is, experiencing a marked expansion in employment, population, and real estate sales. This boom had great impact upon the San Fernando Valley, where population increased by

⁵ Earl Hansen and Paul Beckett, *Los Angeles: Its People and its Homes* (Los Angeles: Haynes Foundation, 1944), p. 48.

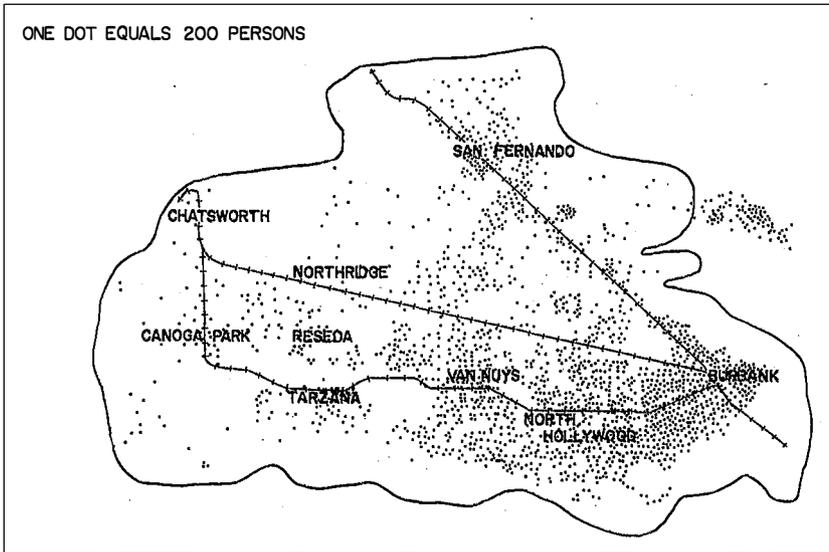


Figure 5. Population distribution, 1950. Source: United States Bureau of Census, Census Tract Statistics, April, 1950.

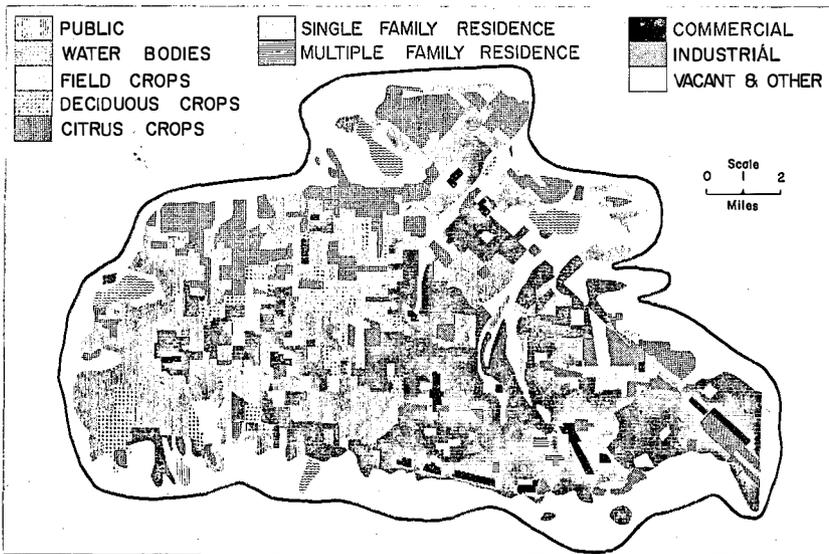


Figure 6. Land use, 1949. Source: Fairchild Aerial Surveys Inc. Air photographs of the San Fernando Valley taken during May and June, 1949.

approximately 73,000 from 155,443 in 1940 to 228,734 in 1945. Population growth was aided by the location of industry in valley towns both during and after the war, and by heavy utilization of the new highway through Cahuenga Pass, which eased travel between the North Hollywood area and central Los Angeles. Improved access accelerated the coalescence of the older communities in the southeast into a continuous suburban sprawl, and, all along the western periphery of the contiguous built-up area, there began a rapid retreat of agriculture before the invasion of low-density, tract-type, residential construction.

Also, the economy was diversifying, with industrial growth taking place primarily in the southeast adjacent to the railroads, and secondarily along the rail line running through the west valley. Of greatest importance were aircraft and aircraft parts manufacturing, both of which were concentrated in and around Burbank. Motion picture production continued to be important, and General Motors provided a notable addition in the form of an assembly plant which covered a large acreage in Van Nuys. The impact of the war was sharply illustrated by the fact that defense work accounted for an overwhelming proportion of the jobs in the valley during the middle-1940's.

The decade 1940-1950, especially the latter half, witnessed the beginning of a new era of intensive valley-wide settlement along highly urban-industrial lines. During that decade, the arrival of approximately 250,000 people boosted the population to 402,538 in 1950. This represented a net gain greater than that for its entire previous history. Also, it has been estimated that the number of persons employed in the valley increased from 29,000 to approximately 120,000 during the same period.⁶ The era of unchallenged agricultural supremacy which had endured until during the Second World War was rapidly coming to an end, and the San Fernando Valley, by becoming one of the most impressive suburban growth areas in the United States, had begun to undergo a pattern of overall development which was to continue at least through the 1960's.

THE 1950's

By 1950 the tide of urban land use, consisting mostly of tract houses and commercial string-development had moved westward halfway across the valley floor (Figures 5 and 6). In addition to this westward and northward spread, subdivision was taking place actively on the periphery of the urban nuclei in the west. The late 1940's and the early 1950's also witnessed the first large inroads made into the best agricultural lands in the south-central and western sections, as well as extensive building-up of the canyons and hillsides along the southern margin. No part of the valley escaped some new construction, and the majority of the new homes were mass-produced. It appears that a constantly improving highway system, an abundance of open and relatively cheap land, a fairly small population, and the prolific development of dispersed communities greatly assisted the rapid spread of an automobile-oriented, suburban landscape.

⁶ Security First National Bank, *The Growth and Economic Structure of the San Fernando Valley, 1960* (Los Angeles: Security First National Bank, 1960), p. 26; News item in the *Valley Times Today*, October 10, 1961.

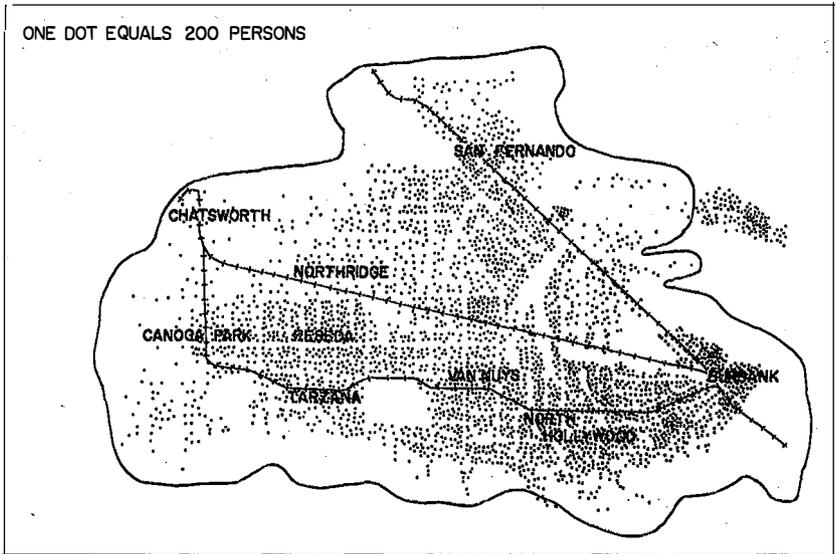


Figure 7. Population distribution, 1956. Sources: United States Bureau of the Census, Census Tract Statistics from Special Census of Feb., 1956; Population statistics for the balance of the Valley estimated by the Research Department of the Security First National Bank.

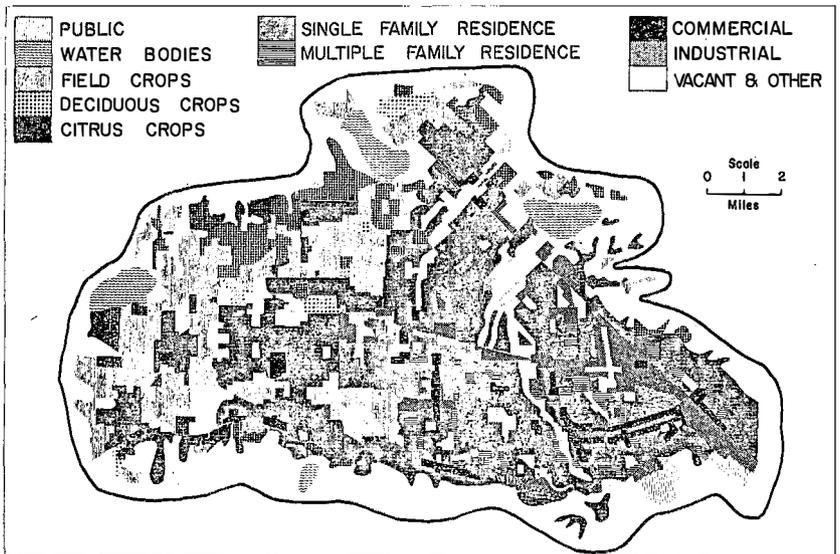


Figure 8. Land use, 1954. Sources: "Land Use Map of San Fernando Valley in 1954," in Los Angeles City Planning Commission. San Fernando Valley, 1955: Master Plan Restudy, reprinted from Los Angeles City Planning Commission, "Accomplishments—1955"; United States Department of Agriculture, Air photographs of San Fernando Valley taken during November, 1954.

By 1955, population had risen to 633,076, an increase of approximately 230,000 over 1950, and tract homes were successfully invading the walnut and citrus orchards (Figures 7 and 8). Agriculture had become vestigial throughout most of the area, but where concentrations remained citrus was the chief crop in acreage. The variety of field crops found in the early 1940's were also present but their acreages were drastically reduced. It has been pointed out that by the late 1950's four agricultural-type areas were to be found on the valley margins: namely, the area of truck and field crops in the southwestern-central portion; the area of mixed truck, field, and orchard crops in the western section; the area of orchard "hold-out" and large private holdings in the northwestern region; and the area of specialty crops and residential agriculture in the northeastern part of the valley.⁷ Only in the extreme southwest and northwest was agriculture practiced on anything that approached large-scale.

Until the late 1950's, commercial development (aside from the commuter-oriented buildup along Ventura Boulevard) was confined mainly to concentrations at the major intersections of each valley community. The principal function of the individual centers was to meet the immediate needs of local residents. Only in the southeast, with its concentrated population, was there a more intensive commercial pattern including both nuclear and ribbon-like forms. Such development was especially pronounced in the larger commercial centers of Burbank, North Hollywood, San Fernando, and Van Nuys.

General mushrooming of tract housing, the rapid invasion of agricultural land, and the growth of industry were, therefore, the most notable aspects of settlement during the late 1950's. The end of that decade marked the finish of the valley as a significant agricultural area, and despite considerable commercial and industrial development, it was clearly established as suburban-residential. Three new trends, however, appeared during the latter part of the decade; namely, the expansion of employment in the valley, the construction of an increasing number of multi-unit dwellings in the southeast, and the development of the first segments of a freeway system paralleling the southern foothills.

THE 1960's

Valley population was 840,500 in 1960, an increase of approximately 438,000 over 1950. During the same period the overall population density rose from 2.7 per acre to 5.6.⁸ Highest densities were associated with the older built-up areas in the southeast where extensive apartment construction was taking place. In general, however, home-building was continuing to spread like a wave from east to west, cutting into the remaining agri-

⁷ Herbert W. Eder, "Some Aspects of the Persistence of Agriculture in the San Fernando Valley" (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1960), p. 123.

⁸ Security First National Bank, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

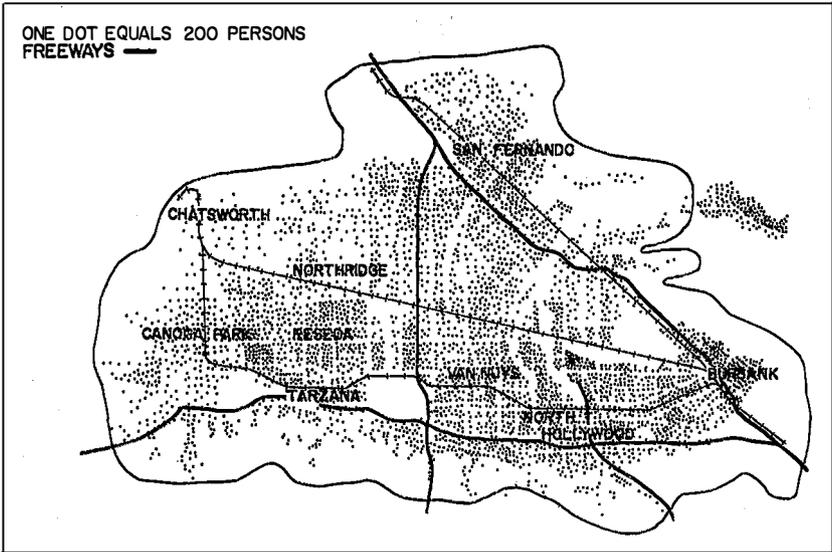


Figure 9. Population distribution, 1960. Source: United States Bureau of the Census, Census Tract Statistics, April, 1960.

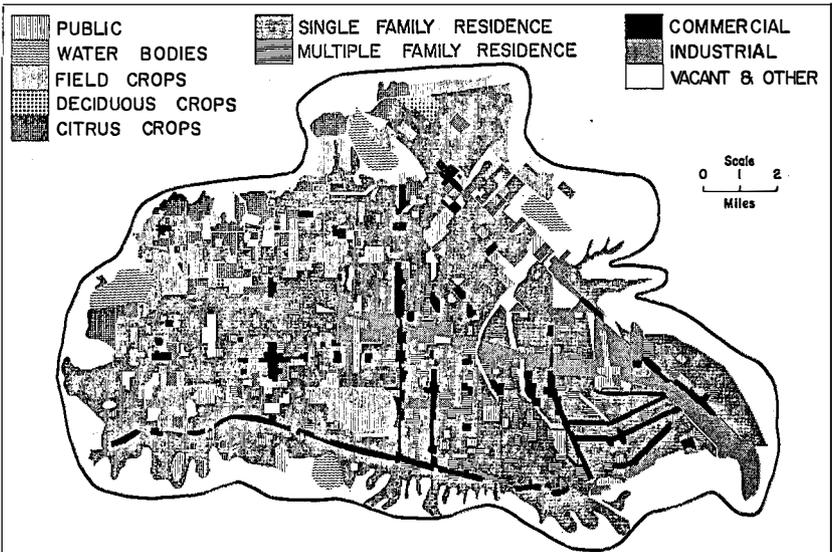


Figure 10. Land use, 1960. Source: Fairchild Aerial Surveys Inc. Air photographs of San Fernando Valley taken during May and June, 1960.

cultural and vacant lands on the periphery, into the hills, and into the vacant enclaves (Figures 9 and 10).

Traditionally there have been more workers than jobs in the San Fernando Valley, and therefore, a consequent outflow of commuters in the morning and inflow in the evening. This condition was extreme in 1940 when approximately 47 per cent of the employed people living in the valley worked there;⁹ however, the proportion of jobs available in the valley has greatly increased. In 1960 the California Department of Employment estimated that about 300,000 gainfully employed persons lived in the valley, and that employment there was about 240,000, or approximately 80 per cent.¹⁰ Obviously, this is not the entire story; the San Fernando Valley is but one part of a vast metropolitan complex, and not only do many of its residents work in other sections of the city, workers from other sections are also employed in the valley.

Industry, as in the past, is largely dependent upon defense and space contracts. The missile-aircraft industry is the largest single employer, with the associated fields of electronics, atomic energy, rocketry, and research and development also being important. In general however, the valley's employment profile has begun to take on a mature look, and may be approximated on a percentage basis as follows: manufacturing, 35 per cent; services, 26 per cent; wholesale and retail trade, 20 per cent; and contract construction, 8 per cent. The remaining 11 per cent is divided among agriculture, mining, finance, insurance, real estate, and government.¹¹ On the basis of 1960 employment figures, the leading industrial centers in the valley were, and probably still are, Burbank, Van Nuys, Canoga Park, and North Hollywood.

With only a few notable exceptions, factories are located along the principal rail lines or in industrial parks. Future industrial expansion will probably exhibit a greater orientation to planned-industrial districts; in fact, it has been strongly suggested that full utilization of the three large industrial tracts which currently exist in the west valley (covering 787,400, and 1,000 acres, respectively) will be necessary if a substantial percentage of the area's growing labor force is to be employed in the valley in the future.¹²

The population of the San Fernando Valley in the 1960's is literally "on wheels," that is, there are at least 1.4 automobiles per household, and approximately 45 per cent of the households have two cars or more. This situation is a response to several conditions, at least some of which are: affluence; a dispersed pattern of jobs, shopping, and cultural opportunities; and lack of efficient public transportation facilities. Also, valley residents are still dependent upon central Los Angeles for numerous specialized commercial and cultural needs. To accommodate this mobile population,

⁹ *Valley Times Today*, *op. cit.*,

¹⁰ Security First National Bank, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹¹ *Valley Times Today*, *op. cit.*,

¹² Dave Siddon, "Industry Sites Demand Rises," *Valley Times Today*, October, 10, 1961.

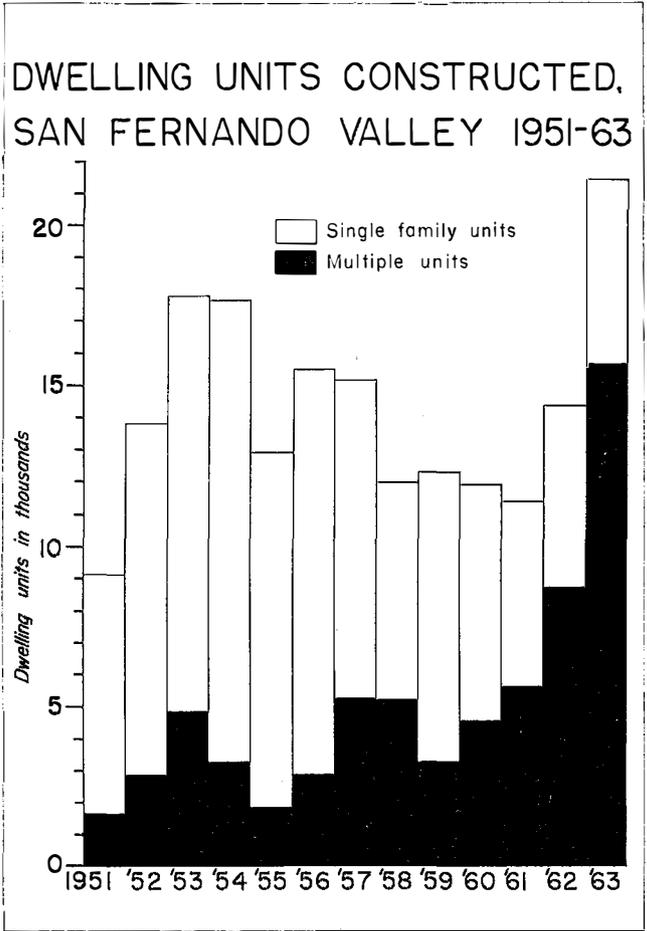


Figure 11. Source: Building Departments of Los Angeles, San Fernando, and Burbank.

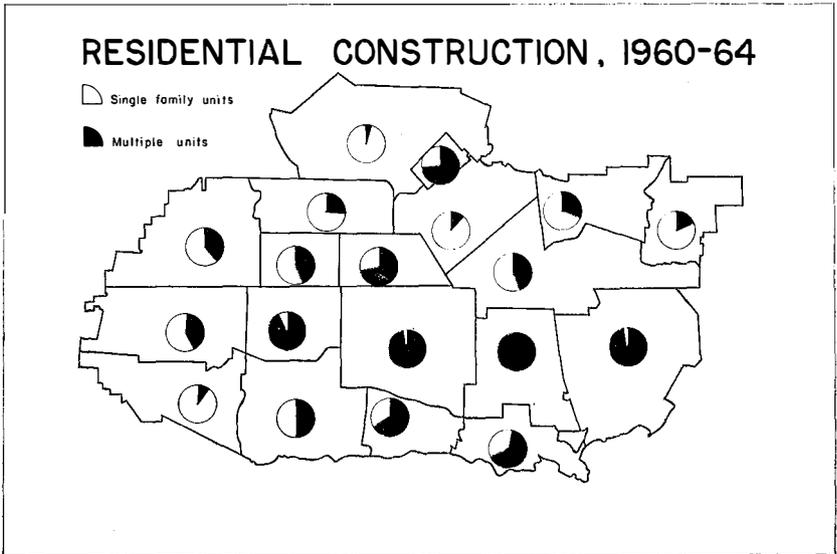


Figure 12. Source: Los Angeles City Planning Department. Population Estimates January 1, 1964; Building Departments of Burbank and San Fernando.

as well as through traffic which is present because of the major regional highways which traverse the valley, there now exists within the San Fernando Valley approximately 41 miles of a projected 83-mile freeway network.¹³ These freeways are well integrated into the projected regional system.

Virtually all normal shopping needs can now be met within the valley, and commercial land use is taking on nuclear and sophisticated proportions, often in the form of large, modern, planned shopping centers. Also, the traditional pattern of strip-shopping districts continues to expand, but the establishments tend to be smaller and less permanent than those in the large shopping centers. Moreover, the strip-developments are feeling competition from the increasing number of major planned shopping centers, and the result is a serious vacancy problem in the strip-shopping districts, especially the older ones. This condition is certainly related to the estimated presence of approximately four-times as much commercial zoning in the valley as the population can reasonably be expected to support.¹⁴

Perhaps one of the most significant trends to appear thus far became clearly evident in 1961. That was the building of apartment houses. By 1961, the construction of such units equalled that of single-family dwellings for the first time; that is, one apartment unit was constructed for each single dwelling. However, during 1963, the ratio changed so that for each single-family dwelling there were 3½ apartment units constructed (Figures 11 and 12).¹⁵ It appears that rising land costs, higher construction costs, less available near-in land, and more young married couples have combined to accelerate the building of apartment houses rather than single-family dwellings.¹⁶ Like the preceding major land use changes, apartment houses are crossing the valley from the southeast. Thus far apartment construction has taken place along primary surface streets or on secondary streets with ready access to freeways, with the greatest concentration being in the southeast.

Population growth has not abated; people have poured into the valley at a rate of approximately 30,000 per year since 1960.¹⁷ There is no foreseeable letup; on the contrary, it is estimated that there will be approximately 1,600,000 persons in the San Fernando Valley in 1980.¹⁸ By this time, the transformation from a scene of intensive field and orchard agriculture to a rapidly maturing urban-industrial landscape should be quite complete.

¹³ Estimate by the Freeway Department of the State Division of Highways, April, 1964.

¹⁴ Haig Keropian, "Program of Survival Outlined to Retailers at Valley Conference," *Valley News and Valley Greensheet*, May 14, 1964.

¹⁵ Gordon Grant, "Recent Growth to Continue: Valley Construction Sets Fast Pace During 1963," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1963; Building Departments of the Cities of Los Angeles, Burbank, and San Fernando, Spring, 1964.

¹⁶ City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning, *Population Estimates* (Los Angeles: Research Section of Department of City Planning, January 1, 1964).

¹⁷ Population estimates provided by the City Planning Departments of Los Angeles, Burbank, and San Fernando.

¹⁸ Security First National Bank, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 and 9.