

# Maxwell Park

by Russell Yee, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Oakland Native

## *Facts About Maxwell Park*

- *That Maxwell Park is the only new addition to be put on the market this year that will have all the improvements in ready to build.*
- *That the water mains are now in to every lot.*
- *That the street car line will be extended at once to the intersection of Fleming and Madera Avenues.*
- *That the property is restricted as to Orientals, Asiatics and Africans.*
- *That the prices of lots are from \$600 to \$1400, with all improvements paid in full.*

**S**o reads excerpts from the original 1921 homebuying promotional flyer for the East Oakland's Maxwell Park neighborhood. Despite being Orientals and/or Asiatics, this is where my parents bought a house in 1965 and where I grew up, right in the center of the neighborhood, as a third-generation Oakland native.

John P. Maxwell was a native of Illinois and an eventual resident of Adams Point. At age 17 he took over operations of the downtown Oakland hardware firm C. L. Maxwell & Son. He prospered and served terms as president of the Athenian-Niles Club and of the California Retail Hardware Association. While in his early 50's he bought, subdivided, and developed Maxwell Park as "*Oakland's Addition Beautiful.*"

*Beautiful views, warm climate, good schools, close to Southern Pacific Electric direct to Oakland Mole, well restricted.*

*Every one of these houses is to be a distinctive product of its creator and will make MAXWELL PARK a place of beauty which any man, woman or child will be proud to call home.*

Once the neighborhood became less "*well restricted,*" the man and woman who were *my* parents, and the child who was me *were* proud to call Maxwell Park our home. Of course

I could take offense at the exclusion of my ancestors being touted as a benefit on the level of good utilities and nearby public transportation. (The flyer could just as easily have read, “*Good storm sewers, fully paved sidewalks, restricted as to Irish and Jews.*”) Nevertheless, I owe a debt to Mr. Maxwell. If he had not put his capital into play, if he had not hired minions and staked his reputation on being a developer, if applying his name to some 477 of the original homes had not added to the needed ego motivation to see the project through, then the houses would not be there, the hilly streets where I rode my bike and trick-or-treated as a boy, where I walked to and from school alone and unafraid, where I played in Courtland Creek, and from where I cultivated the proud sense that Oakland is my city and my home.

My two brothers and I are Maxwell Park Elementary School alumni, classes of '71, '73, and '78. When my older brother graduated in 1971, most of his classmates were white. When my younger brother graduated in 1978, most of his classmates were black. In the course of seven years the neighborhood had turned over. As the middle child, I well remember the sensation of having spectacularly multiracial classmates, but with the white ones always moving away. What would Mr. Maxwell have thought of that?

*The Greatest Money Making Opportunity in Oakland: Maxwell Park, Oakland's Addition Beautiful, Owned by John P. Maxwell*

During the '80s many homes become rentals and too many fell into visible neglect. But then in the '90s and now into the new century, Maxwell Park became one of the few neighborhoods in the inner Bay Area to still have anything remotely resembling starter homes. And so Mr. Maxwell's promise remains good, now very much for Asian-

Americans, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Caucasians, Latinos, and everyone else buying houses, freshly painting and landscaping them, and enjoying the still-rising property values. My parents remark that one now (again) sees single women out alone in the evenings walking their dogs. I am glad for them and for us all. Hopefully we can together aspire in each new generation to be Oakland's Additions Beautiful.

*Postscript:* The most famous denizen of Maxwell Park was surely the decidedly Oriental/Asiatic Bruce Lee, of international martial arts and moviemaking fame. In 1964, he drove from Seattle to the Maxwell Park home of local Kung Fu master James Yimm Lee. There, in the garage of 3039 Monticello Ave., was James' martial arts studio. Bruce was particularly impressed by the specialized workout equipment designed and built by James, who had been a welder in shipyards at Pearl Harbor.

Bruce decided to move to Oakland to live and train with James. Together they ran a martial arts school in that garage and developed the *Jeet Kune Do* style now associated with Bruce's fame. So it was that for two years, Bruce, his newlywed wife, Linda, and then their firstborn, Brandon, lived in Maxwell Park.

(Is this not a golden opportunity for Oakland to create a major tourist destination? How many people around the world have never heard of Jack London or Joaquin Miller but instantly associate a Kung Fu ready position with The Dragon, Bruce Lee?)