

# BREA, CALIFORNIA



OIL CAMP, BREA CAL

Courtesy of the Brea Historical Society

## WORDS TO KNOW

**ranchero system**

**ordinances**

**restrictive covenants**

**alien land laws**

**oil leases**

**vagrancy laws**

**sundown town**

**open border policy**

**tenant farmers**

***Mendez v. Westminster***

***Brown v. Board  
of Education***

**annex**

**John Birch Society**

***Shelley v. Kraemer***

**1963 Rumford Fair  
Housing Act**

**eminent domain**

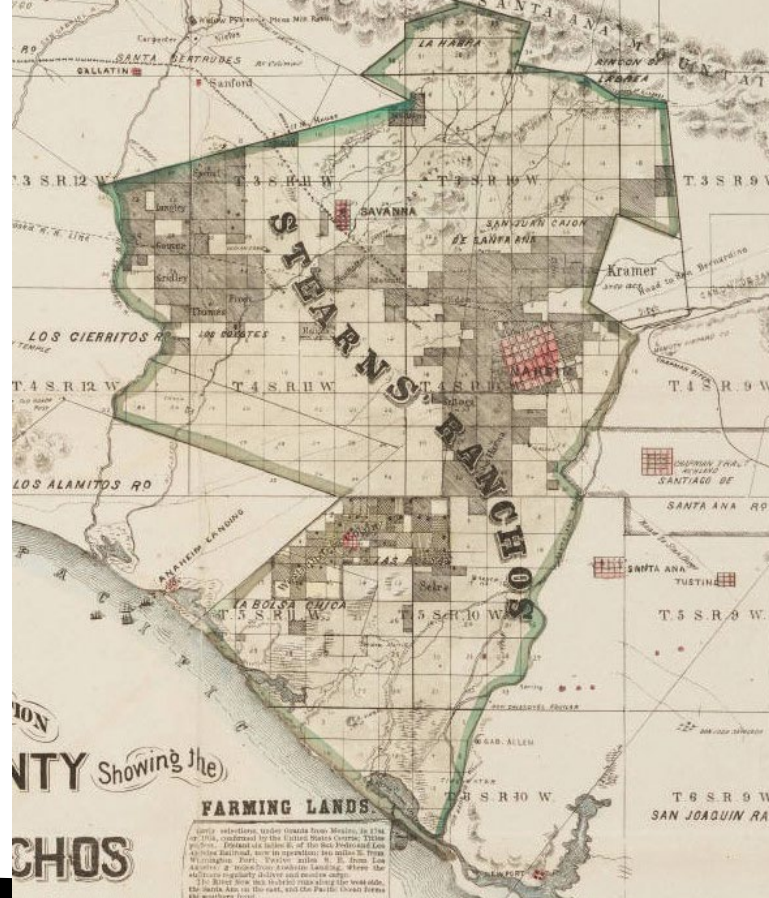
**14th Amendment**

## WEALTHY IN ORANGES AND OIL, BREA LEADERS PRACTICE EXCLUSION

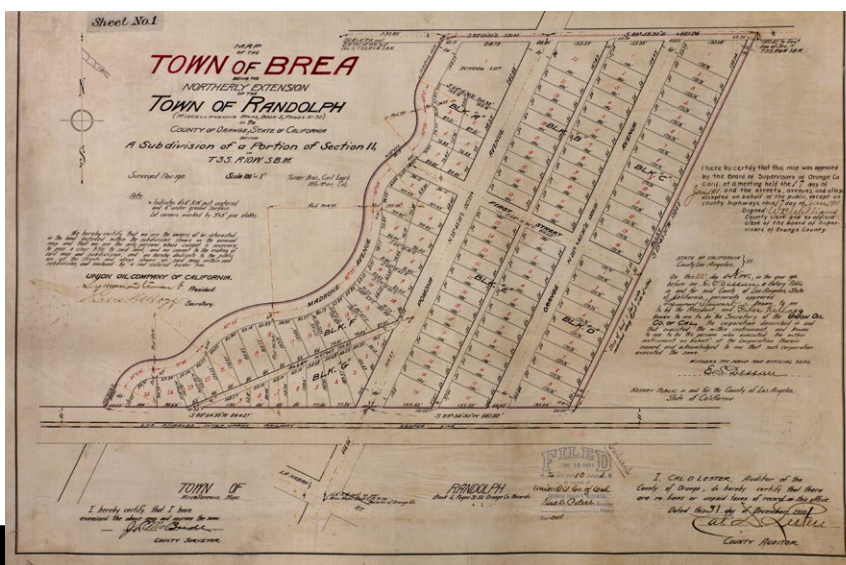
Brea is the Spanish name for tar. The name connects the city of Brea, California, to its history of Spanish colonization, Mexican settlement, and its early days as an oil boomtown. For centuries, the land was managed under a **ranchero system**. In the 1890s, oil prospectors came seeking “black gold” in the tarry hills. The Union Oil company bought 1,200 acres of land near the settlement of Olinda. Four years later, they struck a huge oil deposit, setting off a boom. In the next 25 years, the Brea-Olinda oil field produced 20% of the world’s oil and fueled the growth of a new community.

The town of Brea was established in 1911. It began at the mouth of Brea Canyon, where a handful of businesses and industries sprang up to serve the growing number of families living on the land under **oil leases**. Oil-field workers lived in small, temporary houses that were easily taken down and rebuilt at the next well. But the volume of oil coming out of the hills required long-term workers, and town leaders saw an opportunity for growth.

During the 1920s, Union Oil built 61 homes for its supervisors in the southwestern section of town. Brea’s population lived in two kinds of housing—either comfortable homes for higher-income, long-term employees or makeshift ones for rent to transient oil-rig workers.



This illustration shows how large each Rancho was. In 1851 and contrary to the Treaty of Hildago, land owners were required to prove title. This proved a monumental task and the beginning of the demise of the Rancho period. Courtesy of the Brea Historical Society



In January 19, 1911, W.J. Hole filed a new map with the County Recorder, changing the name to Brea and expanding the town by several blocks. In 1917, Brea was incorporated into Orange County. Courtesy of Orange County Public Records

In 1917, Brea became part of Orange County. Almost immediately, city trustees passed ordinances to regulate drunkenness, loitering, and lewd and vulgar behavior. Known as **vagrancy laws**, these regulations were commonly used by a community to harass people deemed “undesirable” or “nuisances” who were often people of color.

## RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS, THE KKK, AND SUNDOWN PRACTICES IN BREA

During the 1920s, **restrictive covenants** prohibited people of African, Chinese, and Japanese descent from living in Brea. While they were not found on every deed, restrictive covenants enabled buyers and sellers to designate certain areas as “Whites only.”

**Sundown town** practices also helped to keep Brea’s population mostly White. In a 1982 interview, Brea resident Alice Thompson recalled that years ago, “there were no Negroes in Brea; they were not allowed.” Thompson attributed that to the strong presence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) during the 1920s, noting that all the men she knew, including her father and future husband, were KKK members. At the time, the KKK had great power and influence in Orange County. In 1924, an estimated 20,000 people came to see the initiation of 1,000 new Klansmen in nearby Anaheim.

Former Police Chief Don Forkus also recounted sundown practices in a 1982 interview. While no official ordinance existed, Forkus had the clear understanding that Black people were prevented from staying overnight:

*I grew up as a child in this town with the impression that that’s the way it was. I had an uncle that owned a barbershop downtown in the 100 block of South Brea Boulevard. Outside his barbershop was a shoeshine stand, and the man that was the shoeshine man was Black. I think he lived in Pomona. I went in there to get my hair cut, and on occasion there’d be some comment made about the fact that he had to shut down and be out of town before the sun went down, because it was either an ordinance or an awfully strong expectation—one of the two, I don’t know.*

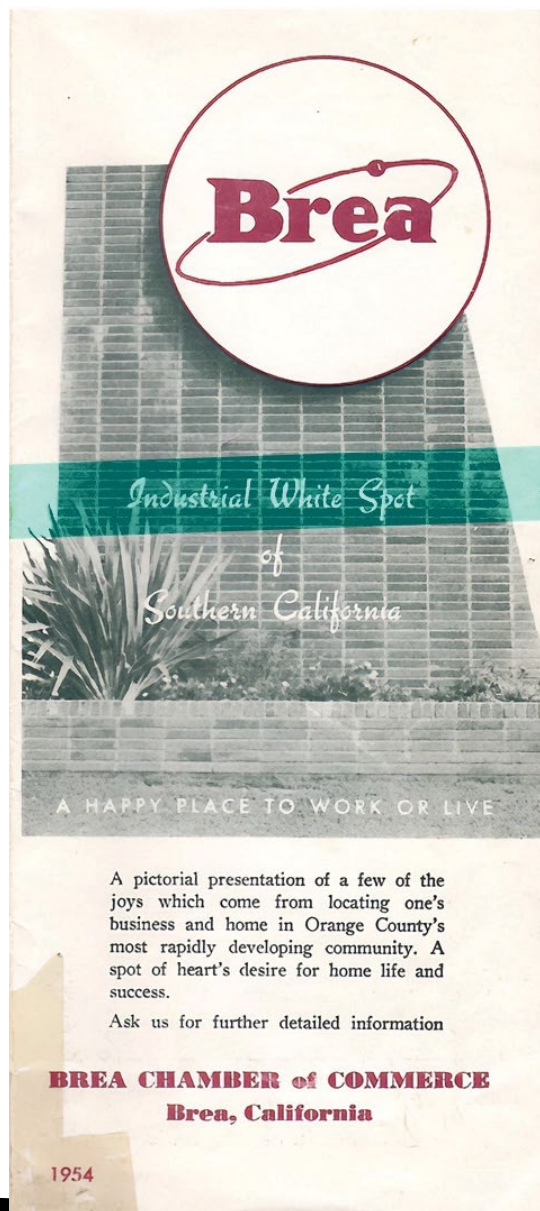
## AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Agriculture was Brea’s other economic engine. Surrounded by more than 5,000 acres of citrus trees, Brea was promoted as the world’s largest orange grove. Before 1950, the citrus industry employed hundreds of immigrant workers. Chinese and Japanese immigrants worked in the groves until immigration restrictions and **alien land laws** cut off their opportunities. Mexican American workers came to fill their places, recruited by growers who lobbied the California government for an **open border policy**. The Bracero Program, an agreement between Mexico and the United States, brought millions of Mexican workers into the country to work temporary jobs. Mexican farm laborers lived in citrus camps on the groves, segregated from White residents.

In 1919, Orange County opened segregated schools in the citrus camps for children of Mexican farmworkers.



The city of Brea was surrounded by thousands of acres of citrus groves, worked mostly by Mexican laborers. Courtesy of the Brea Historical Society



A pictorial presentation of a few of the joys which come from locating one's business and home in Orange County's most rapidly developing community. A spot of heart's desire for home life and success.

Ask us for further detailed information

**BREA CHAMBER of COMMERCE**  
**Brea, California**

1954

The Chamber of Commerce promoted the city to new and relocating businesses as "The Industrial White Spot of Southern California," highlighting Brea's "moral tone" with "no slums, population practically all white, nearly all residents own their homes."  
 Courtesy of the Brea Historical Society

Most of these schools provided only a basic vocational education and ended by 7th or 8th grade. To fight this discrimination, five Mexican American families mounted a legal fight for equal education. In 1946, led by Gonzalo and Sylvia Mendez, successful **tenant farmers** whose children were forced to attend segregated schools, these families filed **Mendez v. Westminster** on behalf of 5,000 students. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit found that this system of school segregation violated the **14th Amendment**. Eight years later, the case served as a precedent in **Brown v. Board of Education** (1954).

## LIFE BEHIND THE ORANGE CURTAIN

As oil production declined, housing boomed. Already home to 23 industries in 1954, Brea was promoted as Orange County's most rapidly developing community. Postwar lending programs favored new suburban construction. Highways, air conditioning, and improved water systems made living in the southwest climate more appealing. Union Oil, the region's largest landowner, shifted to the profitable business of residential development. In a single decade, the city quadrupled in size as it **annexed** property sold off by Union Oil and other landholders. City planners turned newly cleared tracts into large single-family dwellings.

Cashing in on the new market, realtors sold lots with restrictive covenants, creating exclusively White neighborhoods. The Chamber of Commerce promoted the city to businesses as the "Industrial White Spot of Southern California," highlighting Brea's "moral tone" with "no slums, population practically all white, nearly all residents own their homes."

Like other California communities, Brea resisted attempts to end housing discrimination. Many residents joined the **John Birch Society**, a nationwide group that opposed the civil rights movement and the perceived threat of communism. Orange County alone had 38 chapters with 5,000 members. After **Shelley v. Kraemer** in 1948,



the California Real Estate Association lobbied for an amendment to the state's constitution to allow the use of restrictive covenants, arguing that it would protect property values. Realtors continued to discriminate. The **1963 Rumford Fair Housing Act**, signed into law by the governor, attempted to end racial discrimination. The next year, California voters amended the Rumford Act to allow discriminatory practices to continue.

The Brea Mall, built in 1979, drew shoppers away from the downtown. Downtown businesses struggled to compete with the mall's wider selection and easy parking, and the neighborhood declined. By 1992, boarded-up empty storefronts were common. Courtesy of the Brea Historical Society



The 57 Freeway opened in 1972, making Brea more accessible to the rest of the county. Suburban developments east of the 57 Freeway were built from the 1980s to the 2000s. The opening of the Brea Mall in 1977 brought in more tax money, bringing with it more wealth and exclusivity. The success of the Brea Mall pulled business from the downtown and caused fears of decline. Many in Brea argued that redevelopment was a much-needed jolt that would keep the city alive. Pressure built to redevelop the area, but the downtown redevelopment polarized the community.

The city used **eminent domain** to demolish 48 properties for new construction and wider roadways. Dozens of business owners, including William Vega and Daniel Cesario, pleaded with city officials and even sued to halt the seizure and redevelopment. They were unsuccessful. The Federal Bureau of Investigation halted redevelopment plans while Brea was under investigation for misappropriation of federal funds. Despite the scandals and controversy, redevelopment picked up exactly as planned, eventually razing 193 homes and displacing 400 low-income people. Redevelopment included little low-income housing, leading to accusations that Brea was hoping to eliminate poor people from the community.

## BREA TODAY

Today, the city is home to almost 44,000 residents, but draws on the skills of more than 60,000 workers, many of whom cannot afford to live in Brea.

Brea's residential population has grown more diverse. According to the 2019 American Community Survey, Brea is 42% White alone (not Hispanic or Latino), 32% Hispanic or Latino, 22% Asian alone, and 2% Black or African American alone. The housing vision established more than half a century ago put Brea beyond the reach of many. To live there requires at least an upper-middle-class income. Brea's legacies as an oil boomtown, sundown town, agricultural production center, and exclusive suburb are still visible in its patterns of living.



Purchased in 1996 for \$202,000.00

Appraised June 2023 for \$1,420,000.00

Could you afford to re-buy this home if it were yours?



Brea's housing prices have risen so fast that many long-time residents complain that they could not afford to buy their own home at today's prices.  
Courtesy Brea Historical Society, Photograph by Linda Shay

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What decisions are being made today that may impact your community 100 years from now?
- When the oil industry left Brea, the community had to change to survive. Are there industries in your area that are no longer in existence? How did the community change in response?
- How has Brea today become diverse, despite its history of discrimination?