Public housing once was a step up for thousands

January 5, 2004

BY KATE N. GROSSMAN Staff Reporter

At one time, Chicago's public housing projects conjured up starkly different images than the visions of crime, decay and extreme poverty that dominate today. Residents caught cutting across the grass were fined, two-parent working families were the norm and most residents viewed the projects as a major step up from the cramped ghettos of the city's black belt.

"When we moved to Altgeld, it's almost like I died and went to heaven," said William Shaw, a retired deputy Chicago police chief who moved to the Far South Side project from one-room basement apartment with his family in 1945. "Altgeld Gardens afforded us the opportunity to spread out, to have some form of privacy, and to live as a family, truly as a family."

Shaw's story and dozens like it are chronicled in When Public Housing Was Paradise (Praeger Publishers, $67.95, hardcover; paperback forthcoming). The collection of oral histories of life in the Chicago Housing Authority's projects in their earliest years, mostly between 1940 and 1960, were compiled by J.S. Fuerst, with assistance from D. Bradford Hunt.

Fuerst was CHA's director of research from 1943 to 1953, working under the heroine of his book, Elizabeth Wood, CHA's first director, from 1937 until her ouster in 1954. He is a retired professor of social welfare policy at Loyola. Hunt is an assistant professor of social science at Roosevelt.

Fuerst frames the histories, which include thoughtful reflections on integration, education and affirmative action, with his take on what made public housing work and what led to its decline. He highlights Horatio Alger inspirational stories, like those of jazz musician Ramsey Lewis and Nelvia Brady, the first black chancellor of the City Colleges of Chicago.

Fuerst is on a mission. He wants to show how public housing helped lift thousands of families out of poverty, that there is nothing inherently wrong with high-rise public housing living.

He blames CHA's decline on a lack of maintenance, screening, rules and, most important, the exodus of working-class families in favor of the poorest of the poor because of changes in income eligibility rules in the early 1980s.

"This book retrieves the almost bucolic world of public housing in the 1940s and 1950s," Fuerst writes. "That public housing once worked in Chicago is a fact that cannot be repeated enough because it is so contrary to today's perceptions."
He takes issue with CHA's current effort to tear down its high-rises and replace many of them with low-rises that mix public housing, working class and higher income families. He's against the demolition -- which will result in a loss of 14,000 mostly uninhabitable units -- and the higher income mix, saying it's unnecessary. He, like many in the book, thinks the answer is good screening, rules and keeping the number of highly dysfunctional people to a minimum.

"The place started going bad right after 1980, when they stopped being choosy about the tenants they accepted," said Myrtle Morrison, who moved into Wentworth Gardens in 1946 and stayed for over 50 years. "I'm not saying because you are on public assistance you don't have the right to live somewhere, but I think if you put them all in one place, it spoils everything."

The irony is that CHA's current leaders agree. Though Fuerst doesn't see it that way, they espouse the same values as he does: work requirements, a mix of incomes, tighter rules and screening, and a CHA that no longer represents the housing of last resorts.

But neither CHA's leaders nor Fuerst can answer the toughest question: what to do with the extremely poor, troubled families that dominate the projects today.

Fuerst says public housing can't work with too many of them, but fails to acknowledge a reality absent in the 1950s. The rise of gangs, drugs and single-parent families have helped create an underclass that can't be ignored.

If only we could peek ahead 50 years, to the next oral histories. Will they also call it paradise? Only time will tell.