

Japanese History Lives in Buildings

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PASADENA - The historical buildings in Old Pasadena provide more than just a pretty backdrop for shopping and eating.

For a handful of area history sleuths, the ornate brick buildings provide clues to a once-thriving Japanese- American community that has all but disappeared.

A statewide effort, Preserving California's Japantowns, sent volunteers to scour neighborhoods - where Japanese businesses and homes were concentrated prior to World War II - to document any vestiges.

They found that many of Pasadena's pre-war buildings have been preserved as compared with other Los Angeles County cities that have been affected by changes in industry or suburban expansion.

"There's so much that's still there," said Hillary Jenks, a participant in the project and USC history graduate student.

For example, the Richardson Building on Colorado Boulevard once housed the Yamoto Company, a general goods store, but now has Hooters waitresses in orange shorts serving buffalo wings.

"Pasadena is similar to Berkeley or Oakland, where we found a lot of still extant buildings," said Jill Shiraki, one of the project directors. "They were urban cities at the time and remain urban cities."

Outside of Old Pasadena, the group also found homes and nurseries that have survived redevelopment and freeway construction. Though the Lincoln Avenue Nursery has changed hands, the business, operating out of a house, has remained intact down to its old-fashioned kitchen cabinets.

"It was like walking into a time warp," Jenks said.

The buildings allude to experiences of Japanese Americans before, during and after WWII.

"During the war, the Japanese community was displaced," Shiraki said. "Some were able to come back and restart their lives, but in many cases it just wasn't even an option." The ability of businesses to reopen may have

depended upon how integrated they had been in the mainstream community, as opposed to serving specifically the Japanese community, Shiraki said.

The Preserving California's Japantowns project aims to survey over 40 communities in the state that had concentrations of Japanese populations. In the Los Angeles region, Glendale, Long Beach, Santa Monica, San Pedro and Sawtelle are among areas included.

It is funded by California Japanese American Community Leadership Council and the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program, and relies on volunteer effort.

"It's just interesting to see how neighborhoods evolved and to remember that there was this group of people who had contributed to the city's economy, even though you don't see strong evidence of that today," said Pasadena resident and author Naomi Hirahara, who also participated in the survey.

Documenting pre-war Japanese-occupied structures may be only half of the resettlement story.

"It's very poignant to wonder, 'What happened to those people who were there?'" Hirahara said. "Maybe that's the next step of the research."

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