



Former Lodi residents recall their youth as they see stores where they used to hang out. A majority of this part of Lodi, on and near Main Street, was owned or leased by the Japanese who lived and worked there. A tour was organized by the group Preserving California's Japantowns. *(Whitney Ramirez/News-Sentinel)*

## **Preserving Lodi's Japanese culture: Group tours Japanese in Eastside**

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Suga Moriwaki took a group of Lodi residents and other Northern California history buffs to a broken brick object behind the office of architect Mike Smith, and asked what it was used for years ago.

Some people guessed it was a kiln or an oven, but no one knew for sure.

That's when Nobi Tamura, who lived there just after World War II, came up with the answer.

"My mom used to cook sardines in there because it stunk so bad inside," said Tamura, who was a child during that time.

Residents and statewide leaders were excited to hear these and other new stories about Lodi's rich Japanese history throughout the past century during a walking tour Sunday afternoon.

A project called Preserving California's Japantowns is an effort to photograph existing structures and hear about Japanese history throughout California.

There are three official Japantowns — in San Francisco, San Jose and Los Angeles. But the statewide organizations are looking at other communities that had thriving Japanese neighborhoods prior to World War II.



Gerald Kosak points to a piece of graffiti he had written in 1951, when he was about 15. The graffiti was written on a old building on Main Street near Downtown Lodi. It's now an architectural office, but had been a boarding house for Japanese people after they were taken to refugee camps during World War II. (Whitney Ramirez/News-Sentinel)

On Sunday, representatives from communities from Sacramento to Merced County met at the Buddhist church of Lodi to discuss their findings. That was followed by an hour-long walking tour of a two-square-block area on Main and Stockton streets between Elm and Oak streets.

"I'm enjoying this," said Lodi resident Michelle Okasaki, 42, whose relatives once owned the entire block on Main Street between Pine and Oak streets. "I didn't know this (study) was going on."

Okasaki told about the building now housing the Star Hotel on Main Street that her grandfather owned around 1970. She remembers when she was about 5 years old, and she wondered about one particular room at the hotel.

"I think my grandfather had a cardroom because it was a room I wasn't allowed in," Okasaki said with a laugh.

Most of the hotel residents were employees who worked in the packing shed across the street near the railroad tracks.

As Okasaki talked about her grandfather, north Stockton resident Kathy Ikeda scribbled notes enthusiastically, trying to fit the pieces into the puzzle.

Another stop was at the engineering office of Mike Smith, who remodeled an older structure on a block of Main Street with otherwise rundown buildings.

Smith showed the Japantown tourists some historical pictures on the walls of his office at 4 N. Main St. One picture, circa 1898, was of Smith's office building, but at the time, it said "Joe Hinode Co., General Merchandise."

It was behind Smith's office that the brick equipment in which to cook sardines in the 1940s took was found.

### Preserving Japanese culture

The California Japanese American Community Leadership Council is the leading state organization helping to preserve and bring new recognition to the three remaining historic Japantowns in California, located in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose.

The council was established in 1998 through a grant from the Sumitomo Global Foundation to organize and coordinate statewide issues concerning the Japanese-American community.

For more information, visit <http://www.californiajapantowns.org>

While in Smith's backyard, Sumi Wakai Okuhara recalled her childhood in the 1930s. Looking at the current Wong's Mandarin Restaurant building on Pine Street between Main and Stockton streets, Okuhara told anyone willing to listen, "The downstairs was an Italian bakery. The upstairs was a brothel."

There was a competing brothel at the northeast corner of Pine and Main streets, which also housed a restaurant called Shanghai Express, Okuhara said.

Okuhara lived in Lodi until her family was taken to the Stockton Relocation Camp, now the fairgrounds, then taken to Arkansas during the Japanese internment program during World War II. She returned to Lodi in September of 1945.

Before the walking tour, people from throughout the San Joaquin Valley talked about research they had completed on their town's Japanese culture, which included Stockton, French Camp, Isleton, Walnut Grove, Sacramento, Livingston and the Merced County community of Cortez.

Project Director Donna Graves and Project Manager Jill Shiraki conducted surveys in Japantowns throughout California.

Eugene Itogawa, retired supervisor for the California Office of Historic Preservation, said that Lodi's Japanese hub could qualify for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

"These buildings essentially did not change," Itogawa said.

Ikeda said the statewide organization will have follow-up meetings and do some oral histories.

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## Reader Feedback

### 3 comment(s)

nylodian wrote on Jun 11, 2007 12:49 PM:

" I hope the plans move forward. I think preserving such an important part of Lodi's cultural history is essential. Do they still hold the Obon Fest in Lodi? I loved going to it every summer. "

4th Generation JA wrote on Jun 11, 2007 9:58 AM:

" The future of the Japanese community in Lodi is actually quite bleak. The Boy Scouts, Fishing club and basketball teams have all folded up, as younger folks leave the area or lose interest. Activities to reclaim the past and learn about their Japanese AMERICAN cultural heritage is one way to bring back the 4th and 5th generation folks. Look at what a driving force Manila town has become for Stockton. We need to better understand and embrace the past to help folks feel a sense of identity and pride in who they are. "

jhsato wrote on Jun 11, 2007 7:32 AM:

" God, who wants to remember the olden days on Main street in Lodi in the 1940's and 1950's. It's just best to bury the past in J'town and leave it there. Look to the FUTURE. . Interesting story. "