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Gail Dubrow with Donna Graves. *Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese American Heritage.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002. 232 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98245-8.

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Nihonmachi: History and the Meaning of Memory in Western Japanese American Communities

Nihonmachi: History and the Meaning of Memory in Western Japanese American Communities

This is certainly the most unusual book I have ever reviewed. It is also one of the most intriguing. The product of a long-term historical preservation project at the University of Washington's Preservation Planning and Design Program, *Sento at Sixth and Main* is not a formal academic monograph, although it is amply supported by written, oral, and material evidence as well as footnotes. Instead, the purpose of *Sento at Sixth and Main* is to make the strongest possible case for discovering and preserving the buildings and artifacts that document the early Japanese experience in North America. It accomplishes this goal wonderfully, but in the process it also accomplishes something more: taken together, the stories surrounding the ten landmarks that form the subject of the book provide an evocative recreation of ordinary lives in the early Japanese immigration and settlement experience.

When the Immigration Act of 1924 closed all Japanese immigration to the United States, more than 100,000 Nikkei (Japanese living abroad) lived and worked on the American mainland, most residing in California and the western states. Faced with a segmented labor market that severely restricted their access to well-paid and professional jobs, with land laws that prevented them from directly owning land, and with deeply rooted social relationships that grew increasingly discriminatory and racist as the twentieth century wore on, the Issei (first generation Japanese immigrants) and their Nisei children turned inward to family and community resources, creating in the process distinctive Nihonmachi (Japanese communities) in West Coast urban centers and the surrounding countryside. Although many Japanese families farmed by registering their landholding under the names of sympathetic Americans, land-owning restrictions kept Japanese family names out of county land records and severely limited the preservation of much of Japanese rural life until after World War II. For this reason, all but three of the ten sites discussed in *Sento* are urban.

Taken together, the ten sites tell a compelling story of the structure and substance of everyday life in the Nihonmachi. The opening chapter portrays life at an economic site that, together with similar sites scattered throughout the West, formed the economic basis of Japanese life in early twentieth-century America. At Japanese Camp, part of the Pacific States Lumber complex in Selleck, Washington, Japanese logging workers lived literally and socially on the other side of the tracks. There they built their own homes from scrap lumber supplied by the company, characteristically constructing a traditional *ofuro*, or family soaking tub, next to each family dwelling. From the isolated lumber camps, Japanese immigrants soon dispersed into the countryside, working as agricultural laborers until they could rent or indirectly own land. The history of the Neely Mansion in rural Washington state is a compelling story of hard work and modest success. Among the best documented of the sites, it conveys the human meaning of immigrant life in forceful detail. So, too, the story of the Natsuhara country store, which recounts the lives of two generations of shopkeeping families and the modest gains and devastating losses that were the markers of their lives. The story of the Natsuharas is the most affecting in the book and brings the reader closest to the personal and emotional realities of immigrant life.

The next five sites focus on the institutional foundations of Nihonmachi in Washington and California. Nippon Kan Hall was the civic and entertainment center of Seattle's Japanese community. There community residents celebrated everything from weddings to weekly performances of traditional Japanese plays and music. A much-revered social gathering place, Nippon Kan Hall was literally the axis of immigrant life in Seattle. Hashidate-Yu, a public bathing house in the basement of the Panama Hotel, was another kind of community

center. In traditional fashion, men, women, and older children came to the sento to gossip and to discuss community affairs, but mostly to soak away the tensions and stresses of immigrant life and to re-enact a ritual that was at once comforting and familiar.

One of the greatest stresses in the Nihonmachi was the growing personal and cultural gulf between parents and children. As American-born children attended local schools and made friendships outside the Japanese community, they increasingly chafed at their parents' insistence on enforcing traditional Japanese language and culture norms in their own lives. As the oral histories of the Kokugo Gakko, Seattle's major Japanese school, reveal, the tensions between Issei and Nisei were complex and protean. Pulled in opposite directions by American and Japanese cultures, Nisei wanted to please parents, but also wanting to please themselves. In the end, the story of Kokugo Gakko is a story of the tensions of constructing and maintaining multiple cultural identities.

Like Nippon Kan Hall, the Enmanji Buddhist Temple in Sebastopol, California was a center of Japanese community life. Much like European immigrant and African American churches, the Temple provided both spiritual solace and a place to mark and celebrate individual, family, and community transitions. One of the most important of these transitions, especially for Issei and Nisei women, was childbirth, and the Kuwabara Hospital and adjacent midwifery were central institutions of the San Jose, California Nihonmachi. Built to attract Japanese physicians to American Nihonmachi, hospitals like Kuwabara allowed families to receive medical care and treatment from practitioners who not only spoke Japanese, but understood and practiced traditional Japanese medicine. For women, the availability of midwives, such as Mito Hori in San Jose, gave them access to traditional expertise as well as emotional comfort in coping with the worrisome experience of childbirth. As the oral testimonies in this chapter so movingly reveal, Mito Hori was the protective hub of women's lives in San Jose's Nihonmachi.

Underlying these stories of West Coast Nihonmachi is a continuous history of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. This becomes most explicit in the final two chapters that recount the many ways in which Issei and Nisei built their own supportive and successful communities in Los Angeles, in part to meet their own needs and in part to overcome these potentially overwhelming impediments. The stories of life in Little Tokyo and the history of Japanese bowling leagues and the building of the Holiday Bowl in the city's Crenshaw District reveal the tenacity and creativity of Nihonmachi in meeting the challenges of exclusion, discrimination, and cultural opposition.

An important thread woven through these ten studies is the often devastating impact of World War II internment on the Nihonmachi and its institutions. Removing all Japanese residents from the West Coast–Issei and Nisei alike–spelled an end to the traditional Japanese institutions recounted in these stories. With everything Japanese suspect, teachers were jailed, the Kokugo Gakko closed down, the sento at the Panama Hotel drained and closed for lack of customers. Taken together, these stories tell a tale of cultural trauma and displacement. Most internees never returned to the Nihonmachi, but spread throughout the West and elsewhere in America to rebuild their lives. Today marriage outside the Japanese community is the norm among Japanese Americans. But as this book reveals, if assimilation has been a mark of success, it has also marked a process of forgetting. *Sento at Sixth and Main* is a challenge to begin the critical process of remembering.

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