Preserving Our Japantowns

Preserving the hidden history of Alameda’s Japantown

By TOMO HIRO

Nichi Bei News

While Japanese American businesses that lined Park Street have long since disappeared since the wartime incarceration, Alameda’s Japantown community has developed a project to bring to light the century-long history on the island.

Under the banner of the Japantown Historic Marker Project, a group of Japanese American residents on the island, along with city leaders, including the Chair of the Alameda Free Library, have installed the first of four historic markers commemorating the Japanese American community’s history on the island.

Alameda Mayor Marilyn Ezzy Ashcraft said during an unveiling ceremony held Nov. 17, 2022 that the markers will share the history of Japanese American community life and serve as a lesson in the continued fight for civil liberties.

“Some of us have just passed, and you grew up in Alameda, I went through school, I attended Alameda High. I didn’t know we had a community that had a history like this,” Ashcraft said. “So I hope our students, our children, our youth know that history, their local history.

Key stakeholders from the four also got together in 2019 to plan the installation of the markers within four years, but the process has taken more than two and a half years to complete due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jane Chisaki, director at the Alameda Free Library, has led the project from its beginning by analyzing its history from a previous island, where Japanese immigrants first established businesses on the island in the early 20th century, through the forced relocation during World War II and the community’s return afterward.

“We are learning much of our first and second generation Japanese Americans,” Chisaki said as an example of the Nisei who lived and fought with their passing generation’s stories. “As a librarian, capturing the histories and stories of our elders is important and prioritized.

We have found that younger generations are interested in restoring the Japanese, especially during those current times of racial upheaval and social issues. It’s opportune to honor the history of the Japanese American community in Alameda and add to the rich diversity of our ever-changing community.

The project began with the Ben Michael Yoda, then-parter at the Tokyo News Unit-Methodist Church, meeting with congregation member Judy Funaki and cattle editor of Rhythmic Cultural Works.

The three met off the Street from the Marketplace marker’s location.

“We were talking about trying to collaborate with Rhythmic and Buena Vista Church around some of the history of the Japanese American community, and Judy’s sister Jo (Takata) had done a lot of research on history, and communities like we have a lot of history that’s hidden, because it’s not made public for different reasons,” Yoda said of the milestone in the program.

“The Buddhist Temple of Alameda and the Alameda Marketplace. The remaining two markers are dedicated to the Alameda Free Library and the Alameda Free Library’s director, said they have been working on the organization’s archive directory to honor the history of Alameda’s Japanese American community’s history in Alameda’s Japantown.

While the markers physically mark Japanese American community’s history in Alameda and provide access to several members of Tomataga, which means “neighborhood association,” said a parallel project is also in the works. According to Chisaki, the library is working on a project to install dedicated markers by the National Park Service’s Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program.

“Two years ago,” Naito asked, “why do these Japanese American-owned businesses such as tailors and restaurants become so popular? Many of them did not return after the war. May 6th was printed, and the Nisei’s history will be shown somewhere in the spring, though an official date has been set.

To see the Japantown Marker Project, visit the Alameda Marker at 1601 Park St. and the Buddhist Temple of Alameda at 2405 23rd St. For additional panels will be installed at the Buena Vista United Methodist Church at 2311 Buena Vista Ave and the Alameda Free Library at 1505 Oak St.