

Rediscovering Oakland's Japantown

By Kevin F. Dwyer

I AM AN AMERICAN—Someone printed those four words in bold lettering on a long white banner, hung over the door of a Japanese grocery. Photographer Dorothea Lange captured it on film in 1942.

Mineko Masuda, a U.C. graduate and native Californian, owned Wanto Co. Grocery, then located at the corner of Eighth and Franklin streets in Oakland. When Lange asked him about the banner on his storefront, he said that a sign painter had hung it, "but I paid for it, the day after Pearl Harbor."

Masuda was no doubt shocked, as were most Americans, when the air fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. He foresaw that many Americans, angry at the Japanese Empire, would misdirect their sentiment against persons of Japanese ancestry living in the United States—ergo his pre-emptive declaration, writ large across his storefront.

Americans today may recall a television ad campaign that aired after the tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001. Individuals of all ages, religions and ethnicities—Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, Caucasians, Jews in yarmulkes, Muslim women in hijabs, robed Buddhists, Christians, Hindus in saris, turban-adorned Sikhs—one by one, each stared into the camera and with pride or defiance firmly said, "I am an American!" The television spots sought to reinforce the unity intrinsic to our nation's diverse populace and to deliver the message, as much to ourselves as to anyone abroad, that an act of violence against the U.S. was a transgression against every American, without exception.

At the time, people worried that the 9/11 attacks would ignite profiling of Muslims and Arab-Americans. Not ironically, Japanese-Americans spoke up quickly. The Japanese American Citizens League drew a historical parallel between the attacks and Pearl Harbor, hoping to minimize backlash against Americans of Middle Eastern descent.



DOROTHEA LANGE'S photograph of Wanto Co. Grocery's storefront, 1942.

WAR HYSTERIA

For Japanese-Americans in 1942, no slick ad campaigns advocated their civil rights. To the contrary, Hollywood launched into high gear, mass-producing patriotic films in response to Pearl Harbor, frequently with ugly characterizations of the Japanese. Big screen imagery and domestic panic easily overpowered America's budding appreciation of its cultural diversity. The derogatory term *Jap* became vernacular.

It was a time of upheaval and distress for Japanese Americans in Oakland and other Western cities. On Dec. 8, 1941, the day after the attack upon Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government began arresting community leaders and seizing Japanese bank accounts and businesses. Soon thereafter, the government established curfews, travel restrictions and freeze orders, which forbade Japanese-Americans to travel outside of specific zones.

On Feb. 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066, setting in motion a series of progressively restrictive laws concerning *Nikkei* (people of Japanese ancestry), living in the Western United States. Ultimately, Japanese-Americans were forced into relocation centers in California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas.

The War Relocation Authority organized this mass mobilization of *Nikkei*. The WRA commissioned Dorothea Lange to document the relocation; her thousands of photographs, supplemented by her personal observations, portray the disruptive effect that the operation had on *Nihonmachi* (Japantowns/ Japanese communities) across the Western states.

Lange learned that Masuda fled to Fresno shortly after she photographed his storefront.

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According to her notes, preserved at the Oakland Museum of California, Masuda voluntarily evacuated Oakland to avoid an imminent freeze order.

Was Masuda ultimately sent to an internment camp? Did he return to Oakland after the war ended? Some sleuthing in the Oakland History Room reveals bits and pieces. The 1939 Oakland city directory lists Wanto Co. as a grocery located at 401-8th Street. The directory associates the names Mineko Masuda and Tauneo Ogata. Oddly, Wanto Co. does not appear in the 1940 or 1942 directories—Oakland did not publish a directory in 1941. The trail grows cold and we are left wondering what became of the grocer.

Japanese-Americans did return to Oakland after the war. Many of Lange's images depict *Nikkei* returning through the 16th Street train station in West Oakland. But the internment survivors returned to a changed Oakland and an uncertain future, both individually and as a community. The war proved to be a watershed moment for Oakland's *Nihonmachi*. The community as it existed prior to the war simply never resurfaced.

RECLAIMING HISTORY

Where was Oakland's Japantown? What historical or architectural evidence attests to pre-war Japanese cultural and commercial life in Oakland? Where are the *Nihonmachi* today?

Enter *Preserving California's Japantowns*, an historical project with a mission to identify and document resources from the numerous pre-War *Nihonmachi* across California. The group, sponsored by the California Japanese American Community Leadership

Council, reviewed a broad range of historical sources and consulted with an expert advisory committee to develop a list of 43 communities for continuing research.

Project director Donna Graves, a Berkeley resident, remarks that the *Nihonmachi* in her hometown rebuilt their businesses and community institutions after the war, but the resettlement pattern in Oakland is harder to define. She learned that many *Nikkei* came back to Oakland, but whether they remained in the city is not always evident. Churches and other public spaces served as hostels, housing displaced *Nikkei* until they found homes and work. Oakland's resettled *Nikkei* population was significantly smaller and less defined than it had been before the war.

Graves describes Oakland's pre-war *Nihonmachi* as sizeable and robust. With a population of 1,800, it was the fourth largest in the state, behind Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose. Graves explains that San Francisco's pre-war *Nihonmachi* had a population of 5,000, and San Jose's community was similarly sized. Los Angeles' Japantown housed many more *Nikkei*. Graves attributes the strong post-war re-emergence of these three communities, in some part, to their sizes; they had the numbers to network and regroup effectively once their *Nikkei* were released from the internment camps.

Japanese immigrants first began settling in Oakland in the 1880s, with the 1906 earthquake bringing large numbers of Japanese from badly-damaged San Francisco. Oakland's Japanese population by the 1910s was in excess of 1,500. By the time of World War II, Oakland hosted a thriving *Nikkei* community with its own professional and commercial services, and an extensive list of religious, cultural, recreational and educational organizations.

Like most Japantowns, Oakland's *Nihonmachi* included community halls, bathhouses, a Buddhist church, Christian churches, markets, nurseries, laundries and *gakuens*



THE BUDDHIST TEMPLE at 825 Jackson St. was cut in half to move it from its original location three blocks away.

(language schools). Graves explains that the *gakuen* was one of the most important components of any *Nihonmachi*. Through these schools, *Nisei* (the first generation of Japanese born in the U.S.) were taught to speak, read and write Japanese. They learned Japanese culture through dance, music and film.

Graves cautions that not all *Nihonmachi* fit the stereotype of a typical ethnic neighborhood. While San Francisco's centralized hub in the Western Addition serves as an identifiable Japantown, the *Nihonmachi* in cities such as Oakland, Pasadena, Alameda and Berkeley were more dispersed.

Oakland's enclave of *Nikkei* overlapped with the city's Chinatown, but was larger than this downtown district. West Oakland was home to another large and thriving *Nihonmachi*. Additional, less dense groupings existed in the flatlands of East Oakland and North Oakland. Ethnic diversity may be an assumed aspect of modern Oakland, but in the first half of the 20th century, the city was divided into ethnic districts. The interlacing of Japanese through these other neighborhoods was remarkable.

Graves also notes other factors that affected Oakland's *Nikkei*: legal prohibitions. Beginning in 1913, Asians born outside of the U.S. could not own property, residential or business. American-born sons or daughters could circumvent this obstacle by signing the deed of ownership. Unfortunately, as Graves states, the community prior to the war was young; most *Nisei* were not old enough to qualify as property owners. Some *Nikkei*

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enlisted the aid of sympathetic Caucasian citizens to sign deeds. But on the whole, Japanese-Americans resorted to leasing or renting space. Consequently, when they returned after release from relocation centers, their former homes and places of business had been let to other tenants in their absence. Nomads, they often began anew in completely different cities.

In an Oakland Museum collection note, longtime OHA member Dean Yabuki said of the formerly-restricted Lakeshore area: "My grandparents moved here in 1953, so they were probably the first Japanese Americans in the neighborhood."

ASTONISHING DISCOVERIES

Graves and her cohorts at *Preserving California's Japantowns* worked to identify buildings across Oakland that once housed Japanese-owned businesses and cultural life. Using 1940-41 directories published by the San Francisco-based *Japanese American News*, they found 360 pre-war *Nikkei*-owned business listings and as many as 140 existing structures. Graves describes this number as astonishing and the highest number of historic resources found in one city, across the entire statewide survey. The total number of sites, both existing and demolished, is staggering, considering that Oakland's *nihonmachi* was nowhere near as large as those of Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose.

Preserving California's Japantowns shared its research with mapmaker Ben Pease of Pease Press. Pease describes himself as a white guy with a sansei (third generation) Japanese-American girlfriend. His girlfriend Shiz, editor for the quarterly publication *Nikkei Heritage*, has family roots in Stockton's Japantown. Pease began by exploring the history of that *Nihonmachi*, learning that it had been nearly erased in the 1950s when the freeway system was constructed directly through Japantown.

Pease turned his focus towards Oakland and, using data shared by Graves and her team, created a comprehensive map of its pre-war *Nihonmachi* businesses. The map is an eye-opener for latter day Oaklanders.

This author found that his North Oakland neighborhood, an Italian stronghold prior to

the war, hosted a variety of Japanese-owned businesses: Miramoto Radio Shop, Yamashi Shoe Repair, Kanahashi Shoe Repair, Sakura Cleaners, Handwork Laundry, and Midwife K. Hotta. Some Japanese-owned businesses adopted names indigenous to the neighborhood, such as Grove Super Market (Grove Street, now MLK Way) or Key Route Cleaners on 40th Street (one of the Key System's main trolley lines). Many of the buildings that once housed these businesses still stand.

Frank's Market #10 also appears on the map, in this district. It still stands today, one of many in the "Frank's Market" chain owned by the Iino family. The chain employed many *Nikkei* during the years of the Great Depression. The Iinos family leased their markets and lost them while interned during the war—even though three of their sons served in the U.S. military.

East Oakland was sprinkled with Japanese-owned nurseries. The corridor along International Boulevard (then E. 14th) boasted Yoshihara Nursery, Nagata Nursery, Golden Gate Nursery, Nakano Nursery, East Bay Nursery and Matsui Nursery. Motorists driving along Foothill Boulevard prior to WWII would have passed a variety of *Nikkei* businesses: Yoshi's Beauty Shop, Blue Bird Grocery, Yasui Sewing School, and Tomono Shoe repair, to name but a few.

The *Nikkei* enclave that overlapped with Oakland's Chinatown included clothiers, restaurants, physicians, bathhouses, churches and *gakuens*. Many of these structures still stand in today's Chinatown, their Japanese

heritage hidden from view. Of particular interest is the Buddhist Church, designed by *Nisei* architect George Shimamoto. In 1927, parishioners dedicated it with a traditional ochigo procession, marching band and parade of dignitaries. In the tense period just before WWII, church members removed the *manji* (ancient Buddhist symbols similar to swastikas) from the church's entry and roof tiles. For the duration of their incarceration in the camps, church members stored their belongings in the building. The church transformed into a hostel, temporarily, to house *Nikkei* returning to Oakland in 1946. Soon thereafter, they again used the church for spiritual purposes and it thrived, although not without formidable obstacles. In the early 1950s, the State Highway Commission announced plans to build a freeway along Oakland's waterfront. The final route was to pass directly through the Buddhist Temple. Having survived the war, church members resisted losing their temple to a freeway, which was named, interestingly, in honor of Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Naval Forces during WWII. Instead of surrendering their church to the wrecking ball, the congregation cut the building in half to move it. They reconstructed it three blocks north, at 9th and Jackson streets where it still stands today, serving as a spiritual center for Japanese Buddhists.

Outside of Chinatown, Oakland's largest population of *Nikkei* centered in West Oak-

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IINO FAMILY MEMBERS stand in front of Frank's Market, 1480 14th St.



Preserving California's Japantowns

Friendly and engaging, Saito does not seem to hold deep-seated bitterness over internment history, although he does comment that "relocation center" and "internment camp" are misnomers. He likens them to concentration camps, asking rhetorically, "What else would you call a place that is surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards?" He explains that the centers were designed to hold Japanese aliens, but citizens lived there as well, including children born on U.S. soil, too young for their parents to leave behind. Saito reflects that, in some sense, the camps were a mixed blessing. War hysteria, he says, motivated numerous rabid anti-Japanese groups. While overseas, he could rest assured that his family was safe.

Saito's parents both owned businesses. His father ran Saito's Shoe Repair and his mother operated Swans Cleaners. Both stood side-by-side at 2019 23rd Street in West Oakland. The Mission-revival style commercial building still stands today as a laundromat, Saito says. The Saitos owned their stores thanks to an American-born Japanese man who signed the deed to the property. He also signed the deed on the family home, an old Victorian on Market Street in West Oakland. Later, when Saito's parents were naturalized, the properties transferred to their names.

During the war, a family acquaintance ran the family businesses, although sloppily. Failing to pay the bills, the acquaintance angered wholesalers and left the Saitos with a large debt after the war. Meanwhile, the family home became a boarding house for shipyard workers who apparently did not treat it with TLC; after the war, it required extensive renovations before the family could move back into it.

When asked to recollect Oakland's pre-war *Nihonmachi*, Saito chuckles. He says that outsiders probably would not recognize it as a traditional *J-Town*. He says Oakland's Japantown sat near the mouth of the Posey Tube, with *Nikkei*-operated restaurants, gas stations, barbershops and groceries. He also recalls the Wanto Gakuen (no relation to the grocery), also near the Tube. Wanto Gakuen was an independent facility, whereas many churches ran their own *gakuens*.

Saito says the Market Laundry in West Oakland was demolished during Redevelopment, which in the 1950s and 1960s drastically restructured West Oakland. He laments

that Redevelopment also bulldozed his own West Oakland Dental Office, which he subsequently moved to East Oakland.

And in partial answer to the mystery posed by Lange's photo, Saito remembers Masuda and his Wanto Co. Grocery. Masuda had three daughters and one son who were interned in Utah. To the best of Saito's memory, Masuda did not re-open his grocery after the war. His son resettled in Salt Lake City, opening a gas station, while the daughters married and returned to Oakland.

When asked for an example of a pre-war *Nikkei*-operated business still in operation today, Saito says he can't think of a one. He was fond of a Japanese restaurant in Chinatown, but it has since closed. He now travels to Berkeley for fine Japanese cuisine.

What does a 42-year-old Irish-American author and New England Native know about the rich history of Oakland's Nihonmachi? The answer is, a lot more than he did before writing this article! The information presented here is but the tip of a Nikkei iceberg. For more information, visit Preserving California's Japantowns at www.californiajapantowns.com and view Ben Pease's maps at www.Japantownatlas.com. ■

LEO SAITO and his family.

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land. Here one found fish markets, groceries, piano studios, midwives and shoe repair shops. Another Frank's Market operated at 1480-14th St. West Oakland also boasted two large *Nikkei*-run laundries, the Contra Costa Laundry and the Market Laundry. Market Laundry incorporated in 1909 and thrived despite the activities of an Anti-Japanese Laundry League. Sanborn maps from 1912 note that employees slept on the premises, which included a large structure for washing and ironing and a separate one to shelter delivery vehicles. The larger Contra Costa Laundry several blocks north offered dormitory-style lodgings for its male and female employees as well as a dining hall.

LEO SAITO: DENTIST, VETERAN, NISEI

Few in Oakland today could better serve as torchbearer to Oakland's *Nihonmachi* than 92-year-old Hirisho "Leo" Saito, a resource to many investigating Bay Area *Nihonmachi*. Although born in San Francisco, Saito has lived most of his life in Oakland. He attended public schools in Oakland, graduating from University High School (now the Research Institute at Oakland Children's Hospital). He graduated from UCSF Dental School in 1941 and soon thereafter was inducted into the U.S. Army, serving four years in Germany.

Saito expresses mixed feelings about the war years; his family was sent to Topaz Relocation Center in Utah despite his serving in the armed forces. He visited Topaz while on leave and was even married there in 1944.

Ride the rails with Rodna!

By Valerie Garry, President

At our final lecture this year, Rodna Taylor will present "Riding the Rails with Rodna," describing her experience as a Zephyrette on the *California Zephyr*. People describe the *Zephyr*, a sleek streamlined train in the 1950s, as a "cruise ship on wheels" and "a vacation unto itself."

Zephyrettes were train hostesses who also functioned as social directors, tour guides, babysitters, and nurses: in short, just about any role required to give passengers a memorable trip. At any given time, a pool of about 12 women worked the *Zephyr* this way.

Taylor also played a Zephyrette in "Sudden Fear," a film starring Joan Crawford, who played a wealthy San Francisco heiress who meets Lester Blaine (Jack Palance) on a train. Don't miss Taylor's delightful recounting of her experiences! 7:30 p.m. June 12, at Chapel of the Chimes, 4499 Piedmont Ave. \$8 OHA members, \$10 nonmembers. ■