

A Forgotten Era Effort Begins To Document Pasadena's Japanese Legacy

By Patricia Jiayi Ho, Staff Writer, Pasadena Star Bulletin, 9/18/2006

PASADENA - Alan Uchida's nursery on South Fair Oaks Avenue is a historical rarity.

The building that houses Bellefontaine Nursery turns 100 this year and is one of a few links left in the city that hint at a little-known fact - long before the trendy sushi restaurants and Japanese convenience stores arrived, there was already a strong Japanese presence in the city.

"It's amazing," said Uchida, who co-owns the business with his cousin. "The markets, little restaurants and auto repair shops ... I don't think there's anyone else left."

A statewide project to preserve these mostly unknown, informal historic "Japantowns" seeks to recognize places like Uchida's nursery, and give a nod to the Japanese communities that existed among them.

The area now known as Old Pasadena was once a hub for the local Japanese community, with markets, florists and beauty shops, said Bryan Takeda, a board member and former president of the Pasadena Japanese Cultural Institute.

According to a 1940 directory, stores with names such as Hayashi Vegetables, Shoda Florist and Meiji Laundry ran up and down Fair Oaks Avenue and Del Mar and Colorado boulevards.

Though most buildings are not distinctive in themselves, the purpose of preserving them is "not for architecture but the stories they can tell," said Jill Shiraki, a project director of the Northern California-based Preserving California's Japantowns.

"We're looking at cultural preservation. What are the things - that I guess are more non-tangible - that make a community space?" she asked.

Organizers recently identified Pasadena as a city with a significant Japanese past.

The start of the Uchida family story is not an uncommon one.

Around the late 1800s, grandfather Kuniyoshi Uchida arrived in San Francisco from the agricultural Yamanashi Prefecture in southern Japan. He worked on the railroad before taking up gardening and starting the nursery in Pasadena, which was a magnet for those trades.

"Pasadena was known as a place where there were large estates and some prominent hotels in the area," said local author and historian Naomi Hirahara, adding that alien land laws made farming less attractive.

During World War II and the internment of all Japanese citizens, the Uchidas were fortunate to have a family member who was born in the United States and old enough to legally hold onto the property. They rented out the building and returned after the war.

patricia.ho@sgvn.com