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Discovering Pre-WWII Japantowns in the East Bay

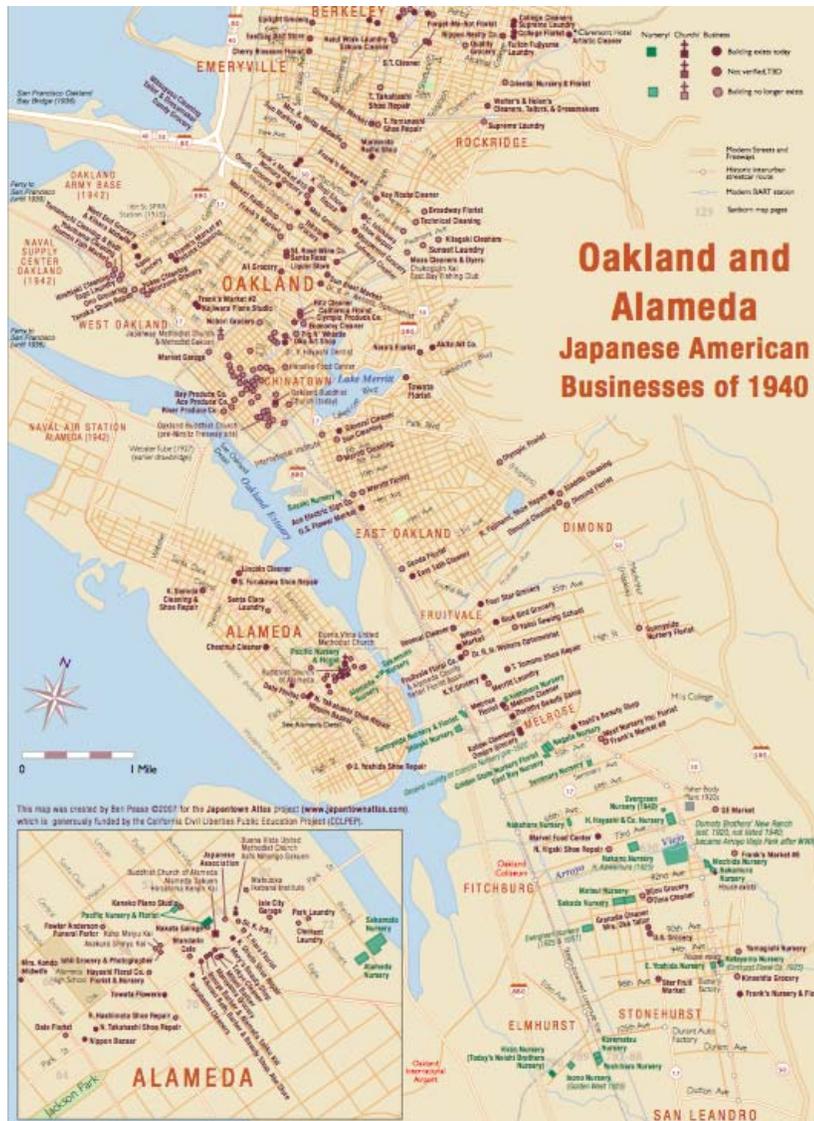
by Donna Graves

One of the surprises of the *Preserving California's Japantown* survey was the multitude of historic resources we found in Oakland and Berkeley. The entire East Bay had a large and vibrant Nikkei community before the war with Oakland and Berkeley home to some of the highest numbers of Japanese residents in the state. Yet more than once we heard "I never thought of this as a Japantown" as our surveys of these communities unfolded, reflecting two different perspectives. For non-Nikkei, the history of Japanese Americans associated with their town was invisible due to the radical disruption of WWII and subsequent erasure of physical signs and public memory to reconnect their histories to the place. On the other hand, many Nisei had never thought of their hometown as a Nihonmachi because they reserved that term for larger and more densely concentrated Japantowns. Yet places like Oakland and Berkeley, and all of the other communities *Preserving California's Japantowns* has documented, held the necessary components for a thriving community.

Our primary source for the historic resources surveys were 1940-41 directories published by Nikkei newspapers, which contain approximately 500 listings for Nikkei businesses, churches and community organizations in Berkeley and Oakland. These listings revealed that Japanese Americans lived and worked in diverse neighborhoods populated by other people of color and working class European immigrants, rather than the readily identifiable ethnic enclave that the term "Japantown" brings to mind.

Today, both cities hold a significant number of historic structures associated with pre-WWII Nikkei life. We found over two-thirds of the 100+ listings in Berkeley still standing. While Oakland's ratio of extant to demolished structures is not quite as high as Berkeley's, the sheer numbers of Nikkei pre-war sites was staggering. Almost 400

listings were included in the Nikkei directories for Oakland – and we located well over 100 structures that appear to date from before WWII. This can be attributed to the fact that these cities had been almost completely “built out” prior to the war, and while some areas of Oakland were demolished for post-war redevelopment or highway construction, the dispersed pattern of Oakland’s Japantown meant that many historic resources escaped urban renewal.



Oakland had a remarkably dispersed pattern of Nikkei businesses, organizations, and industries that stretched from the Berkeley border on the city’s northern edge to the farthest reaches of East Oakland over ten miles away. Map courtesy of Ben Pease and the Japantown Atlas project.

The range of resources we discovered captures many dimensions of Japanese American history. Both cities have churches that represent the vital continuity of Nikkei life; in the early 1950s, the Buddhist Church of Oakland went to great lengths to retain its historic structure, even moving it two blocks north when the I-880 freeway passed through its site! Berkeley retains an unusually high percentage of its historic churches, with two Buddhist temples and Berkeley Methodist United Church still serving members in their pre-WWII locations.

On the other hand, few Japanese American businesses were able to be reclaimed after WWII forced removal and incarceration, so this chapter of community history is hidden from public awareness. We found offices of Nikkei doctors, dentists, and midwives, as well as dozens of small “mom and pop” businesses such as corner groceries, cleaners and shoe repair shops that supported Japanese American families. A handful of florists and nurseries still stand, representing the urban agriculture that provided an economic foundation for many Japanese immigrants.

Beyond documenting these historic sites, *Preserving California's Japantowns* is working to raise awareness in the East Bay and other communities where Japanese American historic sites still exist but have not previously been identified or valued. Project research can provide the basis for local efforts to designate, protect and interpret historical structures and landscapes. We have begun to communicate our East Bay findings in several ways. Project staff organized a community workshop in July 2007 that drew more than fifty people to discuss Oakland and Berkeley's historic Japantowns. We have made special presentations to the State Historic Resources Commission in Oakland, the Berkeley Landmarks Preservation Commission and Oakland Heritage Alliance. All of these groups were eager to learn more about this little-known part of their local and state heritage.

Development pressures around the state threaten many resources that are mostly unknown to local advocates and decision makers, and since our surveys were completed in Spring 2007, several buildings we identified have been lost. As I write, a long-time Nikkei florist and nursery in Berkeley is being demolished. Recognizing that every time we lose a historic structure we lose a chance to connect more fully to our community's story, city of Berkeley staff has committed to consulting our inventory of historic

resources before issuing demolition permits, and pursuing grant monies from the State Office of Historic Preservation to expand on our survey as a planning tool. Through partnerships such as this, *Preserving California's Japantowns* can help local communities reclaim space for a richer understanding of the variety of Nikkei experience and the importance of Japanese American history throughout California.



Volunteer Anny Su, Preserving California's Japantowns and Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association to nominate the Telegraph Avenue studio of famed artist Chiura Obata as a Berkeley landmark. From left: Anny Su, Obata's granddaughter, Kimi Kodani Hill and her mother Yuri Kodani, and Jill Shiraki.



The Oishi family in their Richmond nursery, 1940. Preserving California's Japantowns is working with the city of Richmond, developers and Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Park to consider strategies for preserving and interpreting the Sakai and Oishi nurseries -- the last intact Nikkei nurseries in the Bay Area dating to before WWII. Photo courtesy of the Oishi Family.