

Remembering Sawtelle *by Jill Shiraki*



Harry's Shell Service Station was located on Sawtelle Blvd in the 1930's. In the back, Ikkanda Automotive Repair opened up shop and continued in business for 60 years. (Courtesy of T.Ikkanda)

Living in a particular neighborhood, we are often unaware of its history – the layers of its past, its beginnings and transitions during different segments in time. Yet, in venturing through the pre-World War II survey of former Japantowns, rediscovering its remaining historic structures, browsing through family photo collections, and listening to the recounting of community life by the Nisei, we can begin to piece together and sometimes even capture a glimpse back in time.

Raised in the WLA area, I spent my first six years a half block away from Stoner Park. On hot sunny days, restless from watching my brother's baseball game, I would run to the corner of the park for shade, balance on the rocks, jump off of them, then climb onto the bowing branches of the trees. I always thought it was the perfect-size garden for scampering, but what I didn't realize then is that the garden was designed, carefully sculpted, and dedicated by Issei gardeners. Built in 1932 to foster goodwill, the Sawtelle community's Japanese garden, nearly lost due to neglect during the war years, was restored by the Bay Cities Gardeners Association with direction by Koichi Kawana and support of local nurseries in the 1950s.

Gardening had become a mainstay for the Japanese immigrants in the WLA and Santa Monica area during the 1920s and 1930s, with its close proximity to affluent clients in

Westwood, Bel Air, and Brentwood. By 1941, Sawtelle boasted 26 nurseries/florist shops, 8 boarding houses, 8 gas stations/garages, 4 churches, 3 grocery stores, 5 shops, 4 barbers, 2 sewing schools, 1 beauty salon, and 1 Japanese language school and community hall.



Kobayakawa Boarding House occupying an entire block of Sawtelle Blvd was comprised of several boarding houses, a parking lot, a mess hall, and apartment units, and housed up to 60 boarders at its height. (Courtesy of T.Ishioka)

Tosh Ishioka relayed stories of his father Riichi Ishioka, a modest and unassuming Issei pioneer and businessman, who purchased a city block on Sawtelle Blvd in the late 1920s and built Kobayakawa Boarding House into a successful enterprise, housing 60 boarders at its height and remaining in operation through early 1970s. Mr. Ishioka would provide apprentice training and establish gardening routes for his boarders. His wife Wakano operated the boarding house, coordinating and preparing meals and obento lunch for the gardeners, and providing laundry and maid services.

As the first Japanese to return to the Sawtelle area after the war, Riichi Ishioka and a boarder returning from Denver were greeted by a rock thrown through the front window of the boarding house. The Nisei boarder, having lost two sons in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, placed two gold stars to cover the broken window (a symbol to recognize and honor the loss of their sons who served for the U.S. military), and immediately dispelled any further vandalism. The Kobayakawa Boarding House was cleaned, vacated, and opened for business for the first returning internees from Manzanar. Gardening routes were reestablished and a dispatch service was added to assign Japanese day laborers to assist experienced gardeners on demanding job assignments. Sold in 1979 to developers, a multi-story office building now occupies the historic site of the former boarding house.

A spray of deep colored pansies brings back fondness to Rose Honda of the many afternoons she and her sister spent helping her mother's small business. While her husband worked as a gardener, Mrs. Honda grew and sold pansy plants on a small lot leased from Dr.

Nitta in 1939. Dr. Nitta delivered many of the local Nisei and his wife Katsuko would assist and care for the babies while the new mothers would convalesce. Once a year, the Nittas would have a picnic in their Japanese garden for all the new babies born that year.

While Kumaichi Kageyama worked as a gardener to bring in steady income, his wife Kuniye tended to the bedding plants, sold in five and ten-gallon pots. By 1941, the Kageyama's had leased two lots for F. K. Nursery, the modest beginnings of their family business. Digging tunnels on the F. K. Nursery lot with his brothers, Hiro Kageyama recounts an Issei neighbor angrily yelling at the young boys, caving in their efforts, and impressing upon them the danger of their escapade. In spite of the misadventure, the close-knit Sawtelle neighborhood ensured that children were watched over and proved to be a safety net during the early internment years for the boys who were separated from their parents.

After the war, the Kageyama's were able to slowly rebuild F. K. Nursery and eventually buy a family home on an adjoining lot. In the late 1950s, after returning from military service, Hiro and his brother Aki labored and toiled to expand the family business. Today, five of the Kageyama children have helped transition F. K. Nursery into a budding wholesale business.

Upon revisiting Sawtelle Gakuin for our survey, as I peered into the classrooms, I could nearly smell the sumie ink soaked into the telephone book pages we used for our writing practice. Upon entering the auditorium, I shuddered at the thought of painstakingly reciting a speech in Japanese with my awkward Sansei diction. The auditorium or community hall, built in 1940, was watched over by the American Red Cross during the war, and served as a hostel for returning Japanese Americans after World War II. The Japanese Institute of Sawtelle, established in 1925, continues to offer Japanese language classes on weekdays and weekends, provide dojo space for three martial arts groups, coordinate a senior lunch program, facilitate health and wellness classes, and teach cultural arts classes.

During recess from Japanese school, we would sometimes rush to Yamaguchi's and enter through the side door to buy a treat from the back icebox. We'd marvel at my brother's friend who would pop open a bottle of Coke on the side of the soda case and chug it down all at once. Yamaguchi's, a department store ran by brothers Henry and Jack Yamaguchi, not only provided all things Nikkei for nearly 60 years, but offered a familiar face and community connection. Since our survey work began, we witnessed several long-time Nikkei businesses closing up shop,

and selling their property with pressure from developers – Yamaguchi’s, T & T Service Station, Sally’s Hair Salon.

Despite the loss of historic Sawtelle, perhaps a new identity as “Little Osaka”, adjunct to downtown Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo, with a Japanese restaurant row and J-pop storefronts, offers a new dimension. According to author and chronicler Jack Fujimoto of *Sawtelle West Los Angeles’s Japantown*, “The transformation of West Los Angeles’s Japantown continues to show its traditional Japanese roots on a smaller scale, with newcomers upholding the cooperative spirit of the Issei immigrant pioneers.” Yet, the imprint of Sawtelle’s Japantown history may quickly dissipate unless we capture it.

The Japanese Institute of Sawtelle Oral History Program is currently videotaping interviews and collecting information on Sawtelle’s Japantown. For more information, please send an email to info@sawtellejis.org