

SAN FRANCISCO:

Japantown: The Way We Were...

by Judy Hamaguchi

In an old photo of me hanging onto the railing of an Army ship coming to America, I have a head full of frizzy curls and I'm smiling so hard that my cheeks squeeze my eyes like parentheses on either side of pug nose. Mom, a hopeful new immigrant, Japan-born wife of a *Nisei* soldier she had met in Occupied Japan, named her children after famous Americans. I was Judy, after Judy Garland. My brother was "Kyabean," as Japanese people pronounced it, – after Calvin Coolidge.

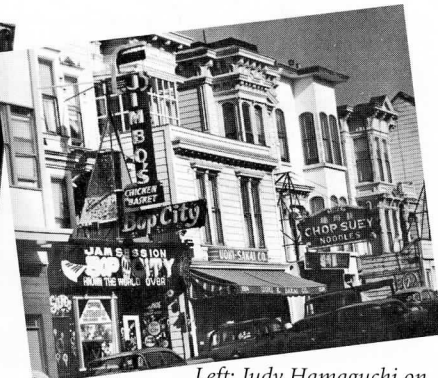
It was 1952. My new home: Nihonjin Machi, San Francisco. Hard times: bologna sandwiches with American cheese, Vienna sausages, hot dogs cooked in *shoyu*. Being so young, I didn't know what poor was. I thought everyone had homes with no furniture. We lived in an old Victorian flat that had been subdivided. My parents' room used to be a dining room, and I think my little room used to be a closet or a pantry. But it was a great neighborhood for a child to grow up in. Everywhere I went, I felt as if people were looking out for me.

Mom, who soon became a single working woman, waitressed in the evenings at the Miyako Restaurant. Sometimes my brother would wake up in the middle of the night crying. Near the window stood a special *kokeshi* lamp I'd turn on to signal mom, who worked directly across the street, that she should rush home, because "Kyabean" was crying – again. If she didn't see my signal, we went out in our pajamas to get her. Several times, the nice black man, Jimbo, who owned Jimbo's Bop City Jazz Club next door, caught us – the bawling 3-year-old and

his anxious 4-year-old *nesan* (older sister) stepping out into the night. He'd scoop "Kyabean" into his arms and ferry him across the street with me clinging to his pant leg. Jimbo was a kind man. I like to think he stationed himself outside like a watchdog, just to make sure we got to our mom all right.

Everything I wanted was right outside my door. Evergreen Fountain was next door with their twenty-five cent hamburger deluxes, orange freezes, black walnut ice cream. I bought comics for a dime at Yama-san's Cigar and Liquor Store. I drank cherry Cokes for a nickel at Koga's Grocery and Fountain, had my hair cut at Mary's Beauty Shop, got sour seeds at American Fish Market. Back then, a penny bought something. Every ten steps was a shop, a restaurant, a friend's house. My family didn't own a car until 1971. We didn't need one.

The annual Bon Odori took place in front of my house, in what is now the Buchanan Street Mall. I'd watch people build the tower which held the taiko drums, and string many-colored *chochin* lanterns around the whole block. By dusk, music filled the street and crowds gathered for the dancing. I loved Obon. It was the one time a year I was allowed to wear lipstick! I loved the music and I loved wearing my kimono. I felt especially beautiful in it. After we danced, our reward was a brown bag containing a sandwich, chips, and a ticket for refreshments at Evergreen Fountain.



Left: Judy Hamaguchi on Buchanan St. in the late 1950s. Courtesy of Judy Hamaguchi. Above: Jimbo's Bop City once stood beside where NJAHS is today. c. 1950s. Photo by Phil Palmer, courtesy of Mike Palmer.

Once a week, my family went to see subtitled Japanese movies at Kinmon or at Sokoji Hall. I always had my bag of snacks: *senbei*, candy bars, bubble gum, a drink. Sokoji had the more comfortable seats – pews, I think. Kinmon had cold folding chairs, hard on the backside, and a scary bathroom – below ground level – concrete, damp and cavernous. The echoing drip, drip, drip of a leaking pipe made it an especially horrifying place if an *obake* (ghost) movie was in the bill.

When redevelopment began in earnest and empty lots took over most of the neighborhood, a special world was being wiped out. My friends were moving away. Just a handful of original residents were able to remain in the area. Cost and restrictions forced out the rest.

Yes, the area had been labeled a "ghetto," but for me, it was like a pleasant village populated by people I felt secure with. I was immersed in my culture, completely in my element, and surrounded by familiar faces. My big adventure as Nihonjin Machi disappeared was riding my Flexie (a sled with wheels) down the newly widened Geary Boulevard, before it was opened to traffic, from Octavia Street down a speedy new slope all the way to Fillmore under the new bridge. It was one quick and thrilling ride!

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tion for one of the empty parking lots were turned down after lengthy negotiations.

Now LTSC has its eye on the last remaining City-owned parcel in the Little Tokyo redevelopment area – a space between First and Temple streets now used as a parking lot for the L.A. Police Department. Unfortunately, competing interests have other plans. A proposed Children's Museum has won City Council approval, while the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and the district's own city council member prefer to see an open space with gardens and walking space.

The Rec Center is supported by a majority of the Japanese American community leadership, although there are some noteworthy opponents. In the community itself, opinion is mixed. *Sansei* Wataru Ebihara, who moved to Los Angeles from Ohio and works in Little Tokyo, thinks the Rec Center would be “good for the local economy. Little Tokyo needs not only business from Japanese nationals, but Japanese Americans as well.” He says, “After parents drop their kids off [at the gymnasium], they will go shopping and visit the cultural places, too. It's one more reason to come here.”

Daniel Kawamoto, 26, agrees. A *yonsei hapa* who grew up in the San Fernando Valley, he recalls Little Tokyo as “foreign” territory, a “novelty,” a place to go for *manju* but not to relate to as an insider. His home turf was the Valley, which had its own *Nikkei* sports facilities and senior services. However, he thinks the Little Tokyo Rec Center could serve as a central gathering point to draw teams from outlying areas.

For 20-something Leslie Ito, who grew up in Pasadena and often went to J-Town, “Little Tokyo is part of who I am and where I hang out. All my cul-

tural experience outside of the home took place there. When my grandmother moved into Little Tokyo, my mother and I would pick up groceries, eat at restaurants, and shop.” This *Yonsei* envisions a mixed-use facility that includes “community service and the arts,” because “while most [young people] play basketball, not everyone does.” She also feels that current programming at JACCC or JANM does not appeal to the younger generations.

On the other hand, Ryan Oba, 35, says, “I like all the things that JACCC is doing. I like that *diSorient 18* [a non-profit literary magazine] is there. I miss the old Little Tokyo though. It was a dirtier place, but it had character and texture. I liked the brick buildings where there are now parking lots. [I miss] the smells of the old gift shops – incense and mothballs.”

Since the 1950s, the *Nikkei*, like most Americans, have been caught up in a vast economic shift away from inner cities and small towns. Although some moved by choice, others were forced out by urban renewal policies. As Southern California *Nikkei* move farther and farther away from the urban core and freeway congestion increases, Little Tokyo is becoming less convenient and relevant to many. The Japanese Americans of Little Tokyo today are grappling with the serious issue of how to sustain a community irretrievably altered by urban renewal efforts to transform a living community into a tourist showplace. ■

Sources:

1. Little Tokyo: One Hundred Years In Pictures, by Ichiro Mike Murase, pub 1983, Visual Communications, Asian American Studies Central, Inc., funded by the Little Tokyo Centennial Committee.
2. Interviews with Daniel Kawamoto, Ryan Oba and Leslie Ito conducted by Joyce Nako, October 2000.

I visit Japantown now and then. I eat. I shop. I look up above Soko Hardware and in my mind I still see the flat where I grew up, and the fire escape that was my deck on sunny days. As a teenager, I'd haul my blanket, some snacks and a radio, out there, and peer out over the neighborhood – contently smelling the food cooking all around me, and waving to friends. From that vantage point, the time came when sadness crept in. As I watched, one by one, every building was emptied and flattened. The neighborhood, always burbling with “people sounds,” now growled with bulldozers. It was all coming down – regardless of protests by the black community and ill-feelings of the Japanese community. Nihonjin Machi with its close-knit residents and traditions, loyalties and activities peculiarly its own, was uprooted and scattered. Fair compensation and moving costs to property owners were ignored.

I remember the day I saw for the first time the empty lot where my home once stood. I had a terribly queasy feeling in the gut. I wondered if I'd gotten everything out of my home before demolition or whether some personal belongings had been crushed beneath the concrete and dirt. I'm certain that something of me remains under the new Soko Hardware building – if only some old bobby pins, a button or a few strands of hair.

The Nihonjin Machi of my childhood was full of amazing drama, loaded with characters, stories, life.... Now it's “Japantown,” “J-town” – a pleasant enough place to visit, eat and shop. To me, it's no longer Nihonjin Machi, the “Japanese People Town” where I once felt a strong sense of belonging. ■