

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

Boyle Heights Grows Diverse



Edward R. Roybal with City Councilman Arthur Snyder, 1970.

■ Part two of Hynda's history of Boyle Heights focuses on the area's cultural and religious transition.

By the 1920s, Boyle Heights had changed from an aristocratic environment of exclusive Anglo residences of the 19th century into an area of land predominately subdivided. This phenomenon helped the area evolve into one of the most ethnically distinct communities in the City of Los Angeles, where composite neighborhoods had distinctive physical characteristics and a variety of densities and housing styles.

Boyle Heights served as a springboard for many future diverse communities in the Los Angeles area. Many of the new inhabitants after the turn of the century came from other sections of the United States and immigrants from other countries including Armenians, Italians, Molokan Russians and Eastern European Jews. Later, the community's diversity grew to include black, Japanese and Mexican citizenry.



Zev Yaroslavsky swearing in as L.A. County Board of Supervisor, 1994.

The Early Arrivals

Why did this occur in Boyle Heights? Other areas in Los Angeles suffered from what was known as "restrictive covenants." Restrictive covenants were clauses found in deeds that stated that only whites could purchase certain property. Many builders were known to create these covenants into new subdivisions. Existing areas would protect its neighborhoods by property owners working together to create the restrictions against non-Caucasians. For reasons unknown to the author, Boyle Heights was free from these restrictions.

Over the years, this community became home to working-class residents. Community organizations evolved as the disparate groups took hold in the neighborhoods. But as surrounding ethnicity changed, the organizations would adapt to its new environment. Boyle Heights was definitely a microcosm of what larger metropolitan cities throughout the world would strive for. This does not mean that there wasn't strife between ethnic and religious groups. Of course there was. But the end result was considerable cooperation.

It is difficult to give exact dates when groups migrated into Boyle Heights. It is also safe to say that migration was also a sporadic event. So let us begin with early arrivals. The Latino community was dissipating by the early years of the 20th century. Communities of Armenians and Italians migrated to the area; exact dates and population are unknown. A group known as the Molokans from the northern Caucasus of Russia arrived in Boyle Heights sometime after 1905. They chose to come to America to avoid military conscription during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05; they were pacifists. They also suffered from religious persecution because of their narrower version of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Jewish Community

Possibly the largest migration into Boyle Heights was the Jewish people. According to some historians, the Jewish population in Boyle Heights during the 1940s was 35,000. While the Mexican population was 15,000, the Japanese 4,300, with the remaining population being made up of smaller groups of Armenians, blacks, Italians and Russian Molokans. Boyle Heights became known as the "Lower Eastside" or "Jewish Los Angeles."

They began arriving into the Boyle Heights community in the early 1920s. The Jews of the area participated in all forms of community activity. One of their intents was to stabilize the area where all ethnic, religious and political groups could become energized and participate. This attitude derived because of certain restraints placed on Jews over their past history. Many community organizations arose including classes to teach English, cooking, music, etc. With the entrance of new ethnic groups in the community, so adapted the populations.

The Jews of Boyle Heights were working-class Jews, as opposed to their prestigious, elite Westside Jewish brethren. The "Eastern Jews" opened many businesses, i.e. Canter Brothers Delicatessen, Zellman's Men's Wear,

Phillips Music Company, Leaders Barbershop, Golds Gym and Karz Plumbing. Many, if not most of these businesses, were found on Brooklyn Avenue (now Cesar Chavez). A few of these establishments remained in Boyle Heights until the 1990s.

Many of these Jewish workers brought with them the traditions of radical politics and trade unionism. Politically in the late 1940s, the Jewish community threw their support behind Boyle Heights Mexican-American Edward R. Roybal for the City Council seat, as opposed to one of their own. Roybal went on to win the seat until 1962. Later that year, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives. Incidentally, Zev Yaroslavsky, who grew up in Jewish Boyle Heights, also became a City Councilman from 1975-94, then was elected to Los Angeles County's Board of Supervisors in 1994, where he remains to this day.

The Jewish religion of the Eastern European Jew has been the mainstay of Jewish life. Supposedly, there were about 25 synagogues in the Boyle Heights area. The most famous, which still stands, is the Breed Street Shul (synagogue), also known as Congregation Talmud Torah, at 247 North Breed St. This shul includes two separate synagogues, one behind the other. The first was built in 1915; the second and larger was built in 1923. Believe it or not, it was used for the 1927 movie *The Jazz Singer*, with Al Jolson, the first talking movie. The story of the Breed Street Shul will continue into the third chapter of Boyle Heights history.

There were a number of reasons the Jews of Boyle Heights left the area. One major issue was due to the Supreme Court's decision in the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* case that ended racial and religious restrictions in home sales. This enabled Jews to move to areas of Los Angeles that, in the past, had been restricted to them. Prior to the 1948 court case, Jews were often considered non-white Caucasians. By the 1960s only elderly Jews lived in Boyle Heights.

The Japanese Community

By 1910, the Japanese consisted of two percent of the entire California population. The state was chosen by many of that community because California had a vibrant agricultural economy. But many moved to the Los Angeles area, especially small communities like Boyle Heights, because of their social and economic standard of living. This group of individuals faced many harrowing experiences in Boyle Heights as well as other places throughout the country.

In Boyle Heights, the Japanese community lived from Sixth Street to Indiana Avenue and from Brooklyn Avenue (now Cesar Chavez) to State Street. Many Japanese high school students attended Roosevelt High School. During the 1940s the Japanese students accounted for one-third of the student body. In 1940, the Japanese population in Boyle Heights was 4,300. This Asian community was second in size to Little Tokyo's inhabitants.

On Dec. 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan, and the next day, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made his famous "a day that will live in infamy." This event caused America's entry into World War II.

Local Japanese were no longer trusted. They were denied working in the business world and to participate in any American activities.

On Feb. 13, 1942, President Roosevelt issued a decree, Executive Order 9066, that all Asians and Japanese aliens from the West Coast, including Boyle Heights, were to be relocated to remote internment camps.

The last camp finally closed in March 1946. The experiences from the camps made an impact on all American Japanese communities for years to come. One of the most obvious stresses came from the isolation they endured. When returning to a multi-ethnic environment, the Japanese found themselves as unwelcome foreigners. Many returned to Boyle Heights, where they continued raising their families. Work-wise, some made their living as grocers at Grand Central Market in Los Angeles, while others worked as farmers and fishermen.

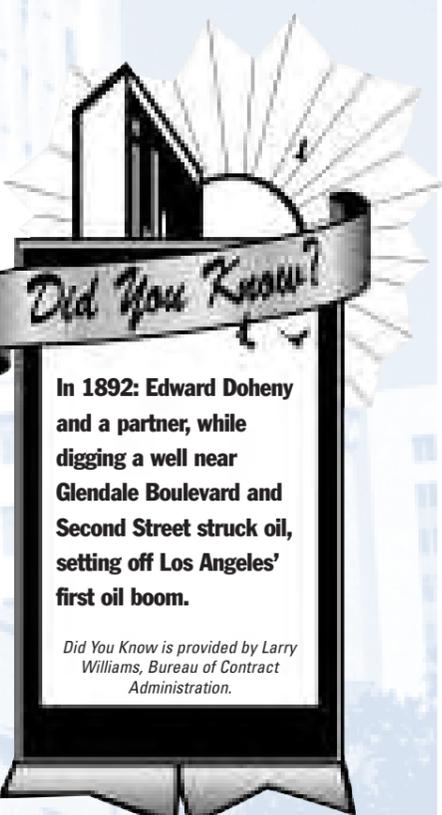
In time, after 1948, those who returned from internment camps moved out of the area to the more prestigious Westside. The Boyle Heights Japanese community left cultural contributions including a rebuilt Japanese Garden, a Japanese



A Japanese-American internment camp, 1943.

Retirement Home and a Buddhist Temple to what had become an interrupted homeland.

After World War II, Boyle Heights became a predominately Mexican community. The next article will concentrate on this community to the modern era.



In 1892: Edward Doheny and a partner, while digging a well near Glendale Boulevard and Second Street struck oil, setting off Los Angeles' first oil boom.

Did You Know is provided by Larry Williams, Bureau of Contract Administration.