

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

A Modern Boyle Heights

■ Hynda Rudd concludes her three-part history of Boyle Heights.

In conclusion of the history of Boyle Heights, this chapter is the most difficult to write, because it deals often with the here and now. Granted that it has been 60 years since World War II, but there has not been enough time to savor all the complexities that have occurred within this topic itself. Therefore, this treatise becomes more like reporting rather than historytelling.

A number of items come from the City's General Plan, produced through the Planning Department. This plan includes 35 individual Community Plans, one being Boyle Heights, mandated Nov. 10, 1998. The purpose of these plans, for Boyle Heights as for the other communities, is to provide a general guide to the development of the community.

Boyle Heights today is surrounded by the unincorporated community of East Los Angeles to the east, Lincoln Heights and El Sereno to the north, Vernon to the south and the Los Angeles River and downtown to the west. The Heights is about six square miles, or 3,807 acres, inhabited mostly by Mexican immigrants and second-generation Mexican-Americans.

Within the publication, Los Angeles' Boyle Heights produced by the Japanese American Museum, is a discussion of what happened in that area during World War II.

"Boyle Heights was particularly vulnerable to wartime racial and political scapegoating because it was home to many labor activists, communists, socialists, racial minorities and non-citizen 'aliens.'" Many young men from the area served in the armed forces, while others were conscientious objectors. As mentioned in the previous article, the Japanese-Americans of Boyle Heights were forced to leave the neighborhood for internment camps. Also, the war changed women's roles in the workplace, while other minority residents were able to advance to previously unavailable positions in the workplace.

Property, Freeways and Government Intervention



The Wyvernwood Housing Project.

The housing in Boyle Heights, according to the Nov. 10, 1998, Community Plan, was very old. Many subdivisions were built back in the 1920s. "During ...this period the physical environment of Boyle Heights evolved as the industries located on the Westside of the Los Angeles River expanded into the northern, western and southern edges of the Boyle Heights Community."

During the 1950s, four public housing proj-

ects were built. Eventually, two were enlarged. But what really changed the infrastructure of the community was the construction of four major freeways within its confines. Two were built in the 1940s, the other two in the 1960s. As a result, Boyle Heights became segmented into four small areas, with one larger neighborhood. This division of land had an impact of poor services to some of these segments. Also, with the building of the freeways, property values dropped considerably, while many local residents moved elsewhere out of Boyle Heights.

A number of government agencies worked



The Sleepy Lagoon Investigation's Citizens Committee.

to provide assistance to the community. Those mentioned in the 1998 City Plan report are: the Metro Rail Red Line extensions; the Housing Authority redevelopment of the Aliso Village public housing project; the Community Redevelopment Agency, evaluating industrial and commercial issues via a feasibility study; a state-sponsored Enterprise Zone, acknowledging that Boyle Heights be designated a High Density Unemployment Area (HDUA); the Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI) project; and the expansion of the Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center. At this time, this author does not know the outcome of these projects. But information could be found within the City Archives.

World War II

Boyle Heights was the center of some difficult racial strife in Los Angeles during World War II. Two incidents stand out: the Sleepy Lagoon murder investigation, and the Zoot Suit Riots in June 1943.

The riots made national news. But the precursor to those riots began a year earlier, when anti-Mexican sentiment escalated during the investigation of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder. This homicide, which involved the death of a teenaged boy near a swimming hole near Atlantic and Slauson Boulevards in August 1942, had

great impact on all young Mexican-Americans.

During the investigation, 300 Mexican-American youths were rounded up, of which 23 were arrested on murder charges. It was never proven that the teenager was even murdered. The press featured the incident on the front pages for months. A quotation from the volume Los Angeles A to Z was that a member of the Sheriff's office "testified that

Mexicans committed cruel crimes because they were Indians."

The "Zoot Suit Riots" hit Los Angeles the next year, between June 3 and June 13, 1943. The confrontations were racist in nature, resulting in part from the Sleepy Lagoon case. The riots involved 11 American servicemen stationed in the City, who claimed they had been attacked by a gang of young Mexican Americans. So the servicemen started a series of riots against Mexican-American – and at times African-American and Filipino-American – youths who wore the ornate, dazzling, drape-shouldered outfits. Police arrested nine servicemen (eight of whom were released; one had to pay a fine) and more than 600 Mexican-Americans.

The rampage was felt in all neighborhoods of downtown Los Angeles, including Boyle Heights. A Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee was formed, headed by attorney and author Carey McWilliams. While 17 of the 23 Mexican-American defendants were convicted of murder and assault, the U.S. District Court overturned the convictions in October 1944.

This past confrontation was considered a gang-related offense. The residents today in Boyle Heights continue to struggle with gang infiltration that has many, many roots and just as many needed solutions. This past April, there was a report from Council President Eric Garcetti (14th District), stating that there is a "Gang Reduction Program that incorporates a five-pronged strategy in anti-gang strategies." This came about from a \$2.5 million grant to the City from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Important Local Institutions

As with any community, Boyle Heights has had and continues to have its share of institutions that impact the local community and others throughout Los Angeles. The following are some of these organizations: Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative; Breed Street Shul Project; Hollenbeck Home for the Aged; Japanese Tea Garden; Jobs for a Future/Homeboy Industries; Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School; and White Memorial Hospital. Other associations and programs can be found in a Boyle Heights directory at www.eastlosangeles.net/boyle-heights.html.

Notable 20th and 21st Century Residents

Here is just a partial list of some notable people who were either born or raised in Boyle Heights:

- Art Aragon, boxer;
- Edward Avila, civic leader;
- Jackson Browne, musician;
- Willie Davis, former baseball player
- Oscar De La Hoya, boxer;
- Jaime Escalante, educator;
- Mike Garret, 1984 USC Heisman Trophy winner;



Welcome to Boyle Heights.

- Joe Gold, bodybuilder and founder of Gold's Gym;
- Jose Huizar, Councilman;
- Cheech Marin, comedian/actor;
- Edward James Olmos, actor;
- Nick Pacheco, former Councilman;
- Edward Roybal, former Councilman and Congressman;
- Donald Sterling, owner of Los Angeles Clippers;
- Antonio Villaraigosa, Mayor; and
- Zev Yaroslavsky, County Supervisor

A New Direction on a Historic Past

This year, concerned and invigorated residents of Boyle Heights took it upon themselves to start a local historical society. They felt the history of this beloved community must be remembered not only for the future, but for the present as well.

These citizens realize that the presence of this society will not only help to preserve the past, but assist in illuminating and teaching the youths of the community of their rich and proud heritage. The new Boyle Heights Historical Society is looking for interested participants to join them in making this new and important venture a reality! For information, please contact President Diana O. Ybarra at: labh.history@yahoo.com.

