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Introduction:

Prior to World War II, the urban core area of Tacoma, Washington served as the hub of a culturally rich Japanese-American community. Beginning in the late 1880s, the booming railroad, timber, and agriculture industries attracted workers to this region, including many Japanese immigrants. Tacoma’s “Japantown” or Nihon Machi encompassed the area between 11th and 19th Streets and Pacific and Tacoma Avenues. Japantown experienced its zenith between 1900 and 1920. After 1920, “it began a slow decline, culminating with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II” (Morrison 2, 41,42). This once culturally dynamic area is now in need of recognition and preservation. The goal of this project, therefore, has been to collect and analyze primary data from various historical archive sources (such as books, old maps, and newspaper clippings) in order to identify any geospatial patterns that exist between the visual representation of Tacoma’s Pre-World War II Japanese community and contemporary Tacoma. These analyses can then offer insights into recognizing and preserving important historical elements.

Methods:

For this project, historic map images (example Fig. 1) were aligned with Tacoma Streets spatial data utilizing ArcGIS georeferencing tools. Next, the locations of Japanese sites were converted to point or polygon features on a map through a digitizing process (Figures 2 & 3). Additional books, historic photographs, and newspaper clippings were researched to locate other relevant Japanese sites in Tacoma. A database table was created to record attribute information for each site (Fig. 4). These sites were then geocoded, using the address field in the database as a primary key. A final comprehensive map visualizes these sites and their classifications (Fig. 5). Two additional maps (Figures 6 & 7) separate these sites into two categories: business and personal life pattern sites.

Results/Discussion:

Of the 282 Japanese sites analyzed, 217 were classified as business sites. The business corridors were located mainly along Market Street, Broadway, and Pacific Avenue. A variety of retail businesses existed; however, laundries, barbers, restaurants, and produce markets top the list. Hotels constitute the majority of the business/service category. Forty personal life pattern sites were located with the majority of those sites being housing. Twenty-five sites could not be classified due to lack of available information. A ground-truthing tour confirmed 17 extant Japanese building sites as of May, 2010. Other extant buildings may exist; however, further research into plat and property records will be required to confirm their authenticity due to street name, building number, and building façade changes over time. One of the most significant outcomes of this project has been the creation of a comprehensive database that is being utilized to organize and preserve vital historical records, as well as to facilitate future research.

Data Sources/Works Cited:

Tacoma Saematsu & Streets Layer Data: University of Washington Tacoma GIS Certificate Program


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