

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Portland Chinatown Museum scheduled to open in June

I grew up in a rural town in Oregon. I remember the excitement of our family trips to Portland's Chinatown. Besides being the only location I saw anything related to Asian-American culture, it was also an adventurous excursion to pick up much-needed items, such as a 50-pound bag of rice, tofu, Chinese greens, and treats — steamed buns and dim sum.

Ever since I moved to Portland in 1989, Chinatown has been declining, with businesses closing down or moving to the Jade District on 82nd Avenue. The gentrification of Chinatowns is a concern nationwide. A report that aired on National Public Radio more than a year ago shined a light on the issue, citing a study by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) that said the number of white residents in three east coast Chinatowns — Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City — has been “growing at a faster rate than the overall white population.”

Many longtime residents of Portland's Chinatown have struggled with gentrification and the increasing erasure of the area's history. I recently spoke with Jackie Peterson-Loomis, who was instrumental in bringing “Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion,” a national exhibit, to the Oregon Historical Society two years ago, as well as curating a companion exhibit called “Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland's Historic Chinatowns.” A retired history professor, Peterson-Loomis has been a tireless advocate for the area since 2000, when she collaborated on a project with elders and other residents who lived and worked in Old Town.

Peterson-Loomis said that “because Asian Americans in Portland could not apply for citizenship or legally buy property until after 1943, Chinatown residents were universally renters and had no control over available housing or the improvement of properties in their neighborhood.” That meant there wasn't much housing for single or extended families that could keep them in the area.

Many buildings were three- and four-story structures built as “single-resident apartment hotels in the 1920s to serve the incoming white-collar workforce.” She said that by the 1950s, the hotels had “deteriorated into flea-ridden flop houses.” Chinese organizations and businesses still flourished during this time, but many families and young married couples began to move out. Chinatown was soon home to mostly single residents and new immigrants.

What remains of Portland's Chinatown is the iconic Chinatown Gate, Lan Su Chinese Garden,

and some restaurants and shops that still bring life to the area.

In the midst of a changing Chinatown, some former Chinese residents and Peterson-Loomis formed a nonprofit called the Portland Chinatown History Foundation. They have begun renovations on the Kida Building, located near the corner of N.W. Third Avenue and Davis Street, which will house the new Portland Chinatown Museum, an organization for which she is the tireless executive director.

The museum is scheduled to open to the public on June 7, 2018. The first featured exhibit will be “Made in the USA: Portland's Chinatown,” a display of photographs by Dean Wong. A new version of the “Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland's Historic Chinatowns” exhibit will be permanently installed in late summer, accompanied by a gala celebration. Before the official opening, however, the Portland Chinatown Museum will premiere “A Tale of Two Ghettos,” Portland artist Horatio Law's new multiple site installation, on May 16. In addition, a live stream of a panel discussion held the same day will begin a dialogue between those in Chinatown and the Jade District about what they have in common and what keeps them apart.

In the meanwhile, Peterson-Loomis believes the most pressing issue is gentrification, including the new construction in the area of N.W. Third and Fourth Avenues known as the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District.

Just this month, a 16-story building on Block 33 (currently a parking lot bound by N.W. Fourth & Fifth Avenues and N.W. Couch & Davis Streets) was approved by the Portland City Council. She thinks having this tall building in the heart of Chinatown will not only raise property values drastically in Chinatown, but also accelerate the gentrification. More poetically, she feels the tall building will “hide the blue sky above Chinatown” and “the intimate streets lined with small brick buildings.” For her, a building like this also erases memories of “Chinese neon signs, roasted ducks hanging in the window, and the strains of the Yat Sing Music Club practicing in the basement at midnight.”

More than a dozen Chinese-owned buildings remain in Chinatown, including the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and the Chinese tongs. Peterson-Loomis said, though, that most of Chinatown's remaining small businesses are struggling. For her and the foundation, the challenges are “undoubtedly formidable,” but “so are the community's hopes of revitalization.”