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Japanese-American men tour very different downtown

Area they knew was dominated by railroads, poverty in 1950s

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Ken Kato, left, and Dave Heyamoto, third generation Japanese-Americans, stand in front of the Globe building in downtown Spokane where Heyamoto lived as a child. Both men grew up downtown in the 1950s when Japanese-Americans and Japanese immigrants ran stores, hotels and laundries there. The lifelong friends believe they first met as preschoolers in "Dharma School" at the Spokane Buddhist Church, then located in a lower South Hill home converted into a church.



Photo courtesy of Dave Heyamoto photo

« Ken Kato, far left, front row, and Dave Heyamoto, in suit jacket and tie, second from right in second row, pose for their second-grade class photo at Lincoln School, on Fifth Avenue on Spokane's lower South Hill, in 1957. (The school is no longer there.) Only Japanese was spoken in Kato's home so when he arrived at Lincoln in the first grade "the bell would ring for the change of classes, but I figured that was the bell to go home, so I went home." The principal finally said, "You can't go home." He learned English quickly after that. "You pick it up real fast because you're a kid."

Ken Kato, and Dave Heyamoto, both 62, grew up in downtown Spokane in the 1950s and early '60s. Kato's family lived in a now-torn down building directly across from the present-day INB Performing Arts Center.

Heyamoto's family lived in the Globe Building, then a hotel at the corner of Main Avenue and Division Street. The building is still there.

Their parents were second-generation Japanese-Americans, all but one of them were removed from their bigger city Northwest communities and forced into internment camps in Idaho and California during World War II. The two families eventually ended up in Spokane.

"Downtown was about the only place you could live," Kato said. "No one else would rent to you right after the war, because of the prejudice."

But neither racism, nor the skid-row poverty surrounding them, defined their childhoods.

Together they explored downtown's alleys, basements and roofs.

"Down here, you could have no money and be very happy," Kato said.

The neighborhood then: Kato and Heyamoto were both born in 1949, both at Sacred Heart Hospital. Their downtown neighborhood was defined by the railroads.

In your imagination, tear down Spokane's convention center and opera house. Tear out Riverfront Park. Replace them with trains cars, a train depot and tracks snaking in all directions. That was downtown Spokane, until Expo '74.

Transient hotels, small stores, barber shops, and taverns on their end of downtown catered mostly to the railroad workers who lived near their jobs.

Kato and Heyamoto remember at least eight other Japanese-American families living downtown when they did.

"Our hotel was owned by a Japanese man from Seattle," Heyamoto said of the Globe, as he looked up to the second- floor window of his childhood room on a recent walk with Kato through the neighborhood.

The alley next to the Globe was junked up with construction shacks and building materials.

"We'd build secret clubhouses and hide from our parents," Heyamoto said.

The men walked from the Globe to the intersection of Division Street and West Spokane Falls Boulevard, crossed the street and proceeded west down the one-way boulevard, which was two-way Trent Avenue when they were kids.

The blocks surrounding Kato's childhood dwelling have completely changed. Gone: the Maeda Japanese barber shop, a Japanese pharmacy, Oscar's bookstore where Kato bought comics, the Union Gospel Mission (now a Chili's Restaurant).

Kato remembered: "I was being a wise guy one day and saw a bum hanging out, and I said, 'Why don't you go home?' He said, 'Son, I ain't got no home.'"

The neighborhood work ethic: Though living in Spokane's skid row, the adults around them worked hard.

Heyamoto's father managed the Globe Hotel and later worked as a bartender at the Suki Yaki Inn. His grandmother, who lived with the family (Heyamoto has a younger brother), was the hotel's housekeeper.

Kato's father worked three jobs.

"My dad worked graveyard at the railroad, then he'd come home and go garden and then after that, he'd do the laundry," Kato remembered.

Kato's parents ran Northwestern Hand Laundry in their rented ground floor dwelling at 333 W. Trent Ave. A wall separated the family's living space from customers. Kato, his younger sister and their parents slept together in a small space. They took baths in the zinc laundry tubs.

The alley behind their building featured Chinese gambling joints, the vestiges of the area's once-thriving Chinatown. A junk store was next door.

"He was actually a garbage man for his real job," Kato said of the owner. "His real job stocked the store."

The gambling joints, the junk store, the alley – all gone. The 1909 building Kato lived in as a child, known in recent years for housing the Arizona Steakhouse and then a music venue called The Blvd., was torn down in 2009.

Kato's childhood home is now a parking lot.

Moving out: Lincoln School, located at Fifth Avenue and Browne Street, where St. Anne's Children and Family Center sits today, drew students from downtown and the lower South Hill neighborhoods. It was so diverse that "the white folk were in the minority," Kato said.

The boys loved the school. They still remember many of their teachers' names.

They do not remember being bullied for their ethnicity. They do remember that their Boy Scout group, led by Taki Takami, was sponsored by World War II veterans from American Legion Post 9.

"And most of them were Pacific theater veterans," Kato said.

In eighth grade, in 1962, Kato and Heyamoto left the cocoon.

"The culture shock came when we got bused to Sacajawea," Heyamoto said. "We might have been one of the first classes to get bused out of a neighborhood. The school bus pulled up there and the door opened and all these yellow, black and brown kids poured out of there."

At Sacajawea, Kato and Heyamoto met kids their age from families with big houses, two-car garages and cabins at the lake. They met the “sons and daughters of the doctors we went to see,” as Kato put it.

Still, the prejudice was never overt. Both boys excelled at Sacajawea and later, at Lewis and Clark, where they graduated in 1967.

When Heyamoto was 13, his family moved to an apartment on the lower South Hill. Between Kato’s freshman and sophomore year, his family bought a house at 26th Avenue and Bernard Street.

Before their families moved from downtown, Kato and Heyamoto watched the men in their neighborhood go to work at upscale South Hill homes as “Japanese gardeners.”

They joked that when they grew up they would hire “Caucasian gardeners.”

Life after the 'hood: Kato has two degrees from the University of Washington, including a law degree. He served as judge on both the Spokane County Superior Court and the Washington State Court of Appeals. After nearly 20 years on the bench, he returned to private practice. He and his wife, Sheila, have two grown children, Kevin and Lauren.

Heyamoto, a Washington State University graduate, worked 34 years for Avista in marketing, advertising, product and business development. He took early retirement and in his second career, he works for the nonprofit SNAP, helping low- and moderate-income families increase their opportunities and incomes.

He and his wife, Jerrie, have two grown children, Lisa and Jeffrey, and a granddaughter, Eleanor Mei.

Lifelong lessons learned in the 'hood: Respect for elders. The men still call their parents’ friends “Mr. and Mrs.” Several Japanese-American parents from their childhood neighborhoods are still alive, including Heyamoto’s dad, George, who is 90 and “out shoveling his own snow right now,” Heyamoto said during the city’s recent snowstorm.

The elders of their childhood encouraged them to get good educations, work hard and “make your way in the new society,” Heyamoto said. In other words, remember your Japanese roots, but embrace your status as Americans.

The men live about a mile apart in southeast Spokane. They see each other on the golf course and at church but wished they got together more often.

Heyamoto mows his own lawn. Though he used to have a Caucasian gardener, Kato’s daughter mows his lawn now because she likes to do it.

“The neighborhood grounded (us),” Heyamoto said. “You remember where you came from. We got grounded in the idea that people are people, no matter what they do or how much money they make. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.”