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Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Archaeology students Laura MacDonald and James Link use a dry screen to sift through soil at the Redman-Hirahara House Wednesday during an ongoing archaeology research project.

Historic find at Redman

Japanese American Community
Cabrillo students uncover evidence of how local Japanese-Americans lived after internment

By ROGER SIDEMAN
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On the eve of events held around the world to mark the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan and the end of World War II, archaeologists at the Redman-Hirahara House are revealing how the war was a very personal affair for many in the Pajaro Valley.

While clearing out decades-old debris from a dilapidated barn behind the home, which was built in 1897, student crews found signs that the barn temporarily housed as many as four Japanese families who were displaced after the war, said Rob Edwards, director of the Cabrillo College Archaeological Technology Program. The prominent Japanese Hirahara family bought the house in the 1930s and lived there until the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake ravaged its

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Layers of newspaper, wallpaper and other wall coverings, including Japanese texts, provide volumes of information about the Redman-Hirahara House and its occupants.

foundation, making it uninhabitable.

Traces of vintage wallpaper and linoleum flooring first clued Edwards and his students in to the likelihood that the barn once housed Japanese families.

A small, square closet, apparently added to the barn's original frame, "is just the right size for a Shinto shrine," Edwards said.

Underneath the wallpaper, they found many pages of Japanese texts nailed into the walls. Crews removed the papers for analysis.

"We had no idea of the barn's importance to the history of the Pajaro Valley," Edwards said.

During the war, the federal government interned 120,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans, declaring them a threat to national security. Many lost their homes, property and businesses as a result of Executive Order 9066, which was signed by President Roosevelt on Feb. 19, 1942.

In Watsonville, 10 percent of the city's 1942 population of 8,900 was bused to what is now the California Rodeo Grounds, before being taken to internment camps after three months. Many spent the next few years behind barbed wire in Poston, Ariz.

Because there was very little construction during the war, and because two-thirds of the local Japanese-American population didn't already own land, there was barely any available housing upon their return in 1945.

"Anywhere there was a roof, the Japanese would use it," said prominent local historian Sandy Lydon. "It makes sense to me that a house that size had people living all over the place."

Discrimination against Japanese-Americans continued after the war. One letter mailed to the editor of the Register-Pajaronian stated that residents had gotten along just fine without the Japanese during the war and there was no need for their return.

"This view was shared by most people in the Pajaro Valley," said Watsonville resident Mas Hashimoto, who lived in the camps from age 6 until he was 10.

Then, there were the results of a survey conducted by the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce and published in the Register-Pajaronian.

"The survey asked its board members whether, upon the return from internment, they would hire us, rent to us or to sell groceries to us, and the vote was 15-3 against our return," Hashimoto said.

"Next week commemorates the bombing of Hiroshima; the timing couldn't be better," Lydon said. "We often overlook the things that are closest to us. These finds remind us of the other hand of the story — the return of people of Japanese ancestry."

Today is the last day the public may tour the student project at the Redman House, located near Highway 1 and Riverside Drive. Edwards is looking for Japanese-Americans interested in furthering the team's ongoing historical research of the Redman-Hirahara House. He can be reached at 479-5014.