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Exhibit highlights Murphy Avenue's checkered history



Diane Hill and Gabriel Baker get their grooves on to the band Sage during the Sunnyvale Summer Series Music + Market. The summer series take place on Murphy Avenue in downtown Sunnyvale, the subject of 'Historic Downtown Sunnyvale,' a new exhibit opening at the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum June 30. (Photo by Jacqueline Ramseyer)

A blue metal sculpture that now graces the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum grounds was originally erected on Murphy Avenue.

“Murphy Street Scene” by John Battenberg, was part of a 1980s revitalization project for the street, which was finally emerging from a long period of sad decline. That phase in the city’s history is explored in “Historic Downtown Sunnyvale,” a new exhibit opening at the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum June 30.

The exhibit includes a series of photographs and maps depicting the slow growth and development of the early downtown, as well as artifacts from the first businesses lining Main Street and the railroad tracks. The display shows tools from the first veterinary office, the first morgue services, items from Del Monte’s cannery, Ryan’s Hotel, Tao Tao’s and the Kirkish store.

Early years

The main street of Sunnyvale’s growing community has seen its ups and downs through the years.

The downtown story began with developer Walter Crossman, who bought 200 acres of land surrounding the train station from Patrick Murphy (Martin Murphy Jr.’s son) to develop his “City of Destiny.” In the budding settlement of Murphy, or Murphy’s Station, of 1897, Main Street connected the train station with San Francisco-San Jose Road (now El Camino Real) and was nothing more than a graded dirt road. On a hastily penciled map of 1898, the name was changed to Murphy Avenue, sitting between Mathilda and Bay View avenues, with cross streets of Washington, McKinley and El Camino Real.

Several businesses were established on the street, including the general store with post office boxes, run by Fred Cornell; the Bank of Italy; Green’s Groceries; and the Stowell and Spalding Building, which housed Fewing’s Department Store (Kirkish’s from 1924). By 1901, the township, now called Encinal by the locals, had grown sufficiently to warrant a post office, but the U.S. Postal Service informed the citizens that California already had other towns with the names Murphy and Encinal, so they decided upon Sunnyvale.

At the time, the intersection of El Camino Real and Murphy Avenue was the entrance to the town, lined by orchards on both sides.

The street improved in 1916 when it was finally paved, three years after the paving of El Camino Real. In 1920, funds were donated for an electric sign arching over Murphy Avenue where it intersected with El Camino Real. The sign was erected a year later by Hendy Iron Works; it was removed in 1942. The new city developed around its main avenue with important businesses like Hendy's, the canneries, Wooldridge's, and the Jubilee Incubator Company, all situated near the train tracks.

By the 1940s and '50s, Murphy Avenue had become a bustling center of commerce. The Bank of Italy changed its name to Bank of America, and other businesses such as the Strand movie theater, Redwine's garage, and Seijo's Depot Bakery were popular downtown destinations. The Methodist Episcopal Church, Sunnyvale's first church, and the Mission Revival-style town hall (1929-1969) occupied two corners of McKinley and Murphy.

Blighted decades

The heyday of Murphy Avenue ended in the 1960s, when Sunnyvale Plaza was built on Taaffe Street and took business away from Murphy Avenue. The once busy street made a steep decline into disrepair in the 1970s and was known as "skid row" and a "blight." The movie theater showed pornographic films and was flanked by adult book shops, bars and pawn shops. Parents told their children and teenagers to stay away from Murphy Avenue. When the Town Center Mall was built in the late '70s in a desperate attempt to revitalize the downtown and improve shopping, Murphy Avenue was cut right through the middle, with one tiny portion leading from El Camino Real to Iowa Avenue, and only one block left of South Murphy between Washington and Evelyn avenues. The 100 block of Murphy was only saved from the wrecking ball because federal urban renewal funds were not available for commercial streets.

Well-schooled help

Teacher Alillion Wilhelmy, whose late husband had been mayor in the early 1930s, had opposed the building of the shopping mall and was outraged at the destruction of the old city hall. She objected to perfectly usable buildings being razed and lost to the city. Ann Hines was a teacher of historic preservation and urban revitalization at San Jose State University, and she petitioned the city to preserve the 100 block of Murphy. She argued that original architectural features, hidden by "improvements" over the decades could be "recycled" and started working with merchants to redevelop the street.

Initially, the store owners were worried that revitalization would increase their rents. Only with financial incentives from the city did the project slowly come alive. Over many years and with a setback during the financial slump of the early 1980s, slow progress was made. The centennial celebration of Mary and Martin Murphy's golden anniversary in 1981 helped raised funds for the project, and eventually, the city appointed a project manager to coordinate the effort. The Murphy Station building was completed in 1983 to anchor the 100 block of South Murphy.

By the mid-'80s, some stores began to refurbish their facades, and the adult movie theater closed. The street was repaved, with reduced parking, and wider sidewalks, and 1920s-style street lighting and benches as well as a tiled fountain in the center were installed. The State of the City celebration in 1987 made Murphy Avenue its centerpiece to promote its new importance as the historic downtown district. Battenberg's sculpture was placed on what was then the end of Murphy Avenue, at Washington Avenue.

In the '90s, the cinema became a nightclub, new outdoor restaurants opened and Kirkish's expanded to multiple businesses within the building. Stoddard's Brew Pub added another new element to the scene, and the building on the opposite corner from Kirkish's (the former Edyth Hotel and old post office) had stucco removed to reveal the original brick front. Finally, the old Del Monte Cannery building was moved from the north side of the train tracks to its current location on the corner of Evelyn and Murphy, housing a restaurant, a coffee shop and a ballroom on the second floor.

"Historic Downtown Sunnyvale" runs June 30-Oct. 20 at Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum, 570 E. Remington Drive. Museum hours are Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, noon-4 p.m. For more information, call 408-749-0220 or visit www.heritageparkmuseum.org.

Katharina Woodman is a member of the Heritage Museum board.

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