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Oak Park walking tour brochure points out spots of historical interest

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That troubled moment in Oak Park's history, on a long-ago June evening, is nearly forgotten now.

It was Father's Day 1969. The nation and the neighborhood were torn by racial tensions.

A group of young African Americans marched to James McClatchy Park and erected a sign, renaming it Brotherhood Park. A fight broke out at a baseball game, and by nightfall, streets were jammed.

Someone called the police. More than 100 shots were fired on both sides. No one died, but 40 people were arrested, and police ransacked the Black Panthers' offices at 2941 35th St.

The incident is part of the Oak Park story told by urban geographer Robin Datel, a professor at California State University, Sacramento. She has written an illustrated guide to 39 historic and notable locations in Oak Park's old downtown area, including the long-gone building occupied by the militant Panthers' local chapter.

"Time magazine called Sacramento the most diverse city in the United States," Datel said, "so my idea is: Let's have that show up in things like walking-tour brochures and histories, so that people can understand diversity and its difficult moments as well as its happy outcomes."

Both are on display in Datel's bite-size history of Sacramento's earliest suburb. A map will direct people to such locations as a 1912 Craftsman-style house built by meat merchant Jesse Gostick, the former site of the Oak Park School of Afro-American Thought and the grand, neoclassical US Bank building at Broadway and Third Avenue.

"I think it's going to enlighten people," said Georgia "Mother Rose" West, who runs Oak Park's Underground Books and is Mayor Kevin Johnson's mother. "A lot of people moving in don't know the history."

The free Central Oak Park Walking Tour brochure, produced by CSUS and the Center for Sacramento History, will be available starting Thursday at various Oak Park businesses and during a 7 p.m. lecture by Datel at the Guild Theater.

"You can understand the history and identity of a neighborhood by looking at what's here and reading the cultural landscape as you might any other artifact," said Datel.

In 1887, developer Edwin Alsup subdivided the 230- acre William Doyle Ranch a few miles southeast of downtown Sacramento and named it Oak Park for the grove of trees at its center. That grove is where McClatchy Park is now, and from 1913 to 1920, it was the site of Joyland amusement park, a popular weekend destination for Sacramentans.

The neighborhood grew slowly until public transportation arrived. By 1894, four streetcar lines connected Oak Park to the Sacramento grid (the numbers-and-letters streets laid out just after the Gold Rush).

Oak Park flourished in the first two decades of the 20th century, in part because the redevelopment of Sacramento's West End (which now includes Old Sacramento) pushed hundreds of people out and into other neighborhoods. Many moved to Oak Park, where land was cheap and, until Sacramento annexed it in 1911, there were no city taxes. Further, Oak Park had no restrictive "whites only" covenants on property deeds, making it attractive to minorities.

Oak Park has long been known as an African American community, but today Latinos make up 43 percent of the population, while just 21 percent are African American, according to the demographic research firm Claritas. Whites and Asian Americans each make up about 15 percent of the neighborhood.

Today, Oak Park appears to be thriving at its center. A bustling Old Soul coffeehouse at 35th Street and Broadway sits next to the cozy Underground Books, which is near the restored Guild Theater.

Sacramento hopes to win \$5 million in state grants to spruce up McClatchy Park, and last week Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services broke ground on a \$3.5 million expansion.

Datel took on Oak Park as a project in 2003 when she assigned students in her CSUS urban geography field class to interview residents. She gave her 2005 class the same assignment. Some of the students' findings are included in the walking-tour brochure.

"I wanted to get them engaged in a neighborhood they might not ordinarily visit," Datel said. "I think we're not good in our country in creating diversity at the neighborhood scale. We're diverse, but we're still segregated. I keep thinking, if I can get people to get out and about, and work on a higher level of diversity, that's all to the good."

Datel, who is white and lives in Davis, was 14 when she arrived in the Sacramento area with her family in June 1969, about the time of the Father's Day incident in Oak Park.

"It didn't really rise to the level of a riot, but it was a racially fraught incident with violence," she said. "Some argue that the police instigated it, and we forget now how strained police relations were with African Americans at that time."

Almost as soon as her family was settled, Datel's mother signed her two daughters up for a Girl Scouts outreach program that sent white girls from Rancho Cordova into the largely African American neighborhood of Del Paso Heights for a summer day camp.

"So I arrived in the middle of a lot of consternation and angst around these issues and immediately got involved with an effort to have young people of different races get to know each other," she said.

'LOCAL PLACES TELL BIG STORIES'

What: Lecture by CSUS urban geography professor Robin Dattel, author of the Central Oak Park Walking Tour brochure.

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Where: Guild Theater, 2828 35th St., Sacramento

Cost: Free

Self-guided tour brochures: Pick up a free self-guided tour map at Dattel's lecture or at the following locations starting Friday: Center for Sacramento History, 551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd.; Evolve the Gallery, 2907 35th St.; Underground Books, 2814 35th St.; Old Soul Co., 3434 Broadway; US Bank, 3418 Broadway. The brochure will also be available for download, starting Friday, at www.centerforsacramento history.org.

Information: (916) 808-7072, www.centerforsacramento history.org

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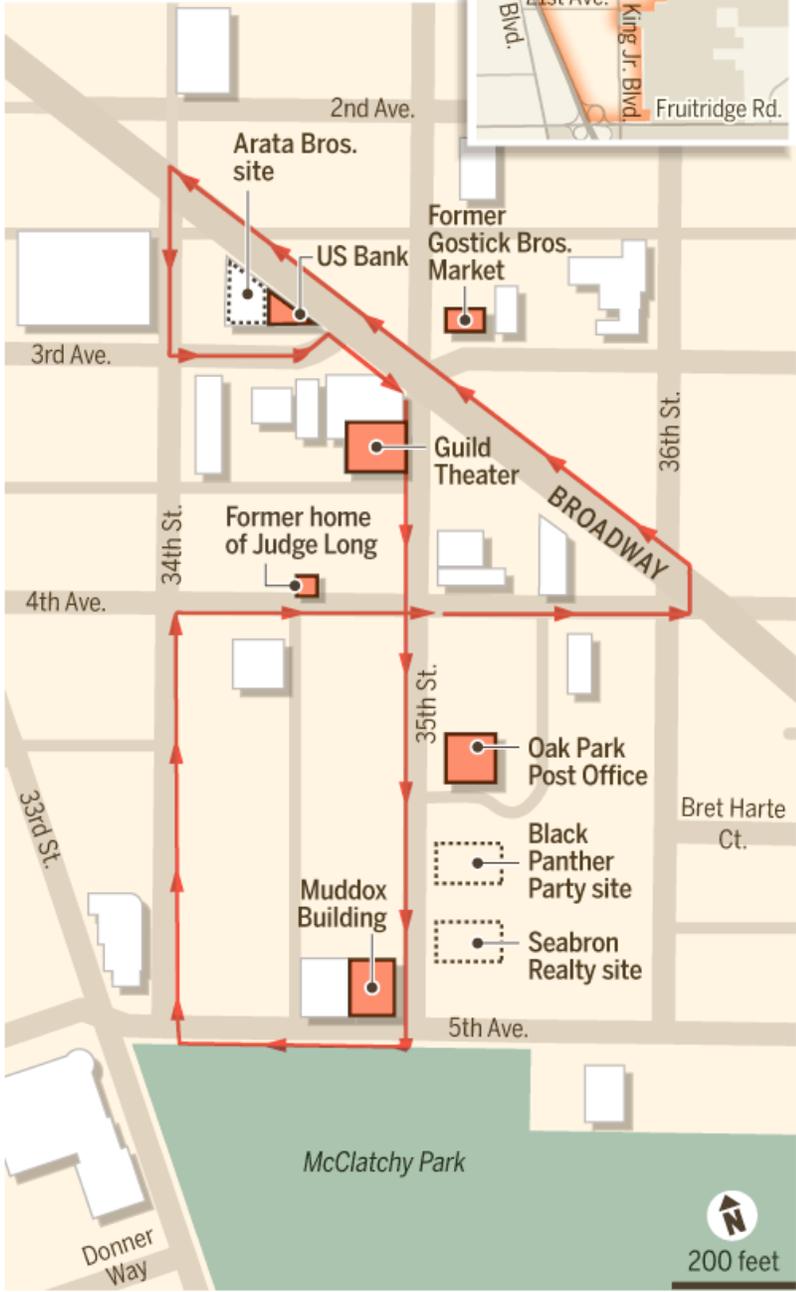
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Call The Bee's Dixie Reid, (916) 321-1134. The Bee's Philip Reese contributed to this report.

CENTRAL OAK PARK WALKING TOUR

The Center for Sacramento History and Robin Dattel, a professor at CSUS, have partnered to produce a brochure with a self-guided tour of central Oak Park listing 39 historic locations. Here are some of Dattel's favorites.



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