

“HISTORY COULD SAVE VERDUGO HILLS GOLF COURSE”

Preservation, Coalition, and Tuna Canyon¹

By *Jean-Paul R. deGuzman*

ABSTRACT: This study demonstrates how the campaign to win Historic Cultural Monument status for the site of a World War II enemy-alien detention station was able to achieve its goal by working with unlikely allies with different agendas. The goal of the core group, the Tuna Canyon Detention Station or TCDS Coalition, was monument status to bring greater attention to the injustices of wartime prejudice and serve as a powerful reminder to ensure such actions would not occur again. The coalition succeeded in educating the public about the site’s historical significance.

Keywords: historic site preservation; Japanese American wartime detention; public history activism; coalition-building

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1. This article is dedicated to all of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station detainees and their descendants in the hope that the history of xenophobia and racism of World War II will never repeat itself. I extend my sincere gratitude to all of the members of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition, particularly Lloyd Hitt and Nancy Kyoko Oda, for their dedication and the example they set. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Hitt for his careful comments on earlier drafts of this article. My thanks also go to Chrissy Lau, Lily Anne Welty Tamai, and Cherstin Lyon for organizing the conference panel from which this article originated. This piece would have never come to fruition without the encouragement, constructive feedback, and good cheer of *Southern California Quarterly* editor, Merry Ovnick. I am thankful for her guidance as well as the helpful critique of the anonymous reviewer.

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INTRODUCTION

With incredible vigor, residents of Southern California's Sunland-Tujunga region, located in a corridor that connects the San Fernando and Crescenta Valleys, have defended their neighborhoods from development. As a result, Sunland-Tujunga has retained much of its semi-rural suburban geography enjoyed by residents for generations. By the mid-2000s, long-time residents had launched a crusade to save a popular and affordable golf course in the neighborhood. Unexpectedly, that process led to a tenacious campaign to save one of Los Angeles's long-forgotten vestiges of the Second World War: the Tuna Canyon Detention Station (TCDS).

This article examines the unanticipated roots of the efforts to place TCDS, a World War II-era "enemy alien camp" located on the farthest outskirts of 1940s Los Angeles, on the city's Register of Historic Cultural Monuments (HCM). Unlike more recognizable sites of Japanese American wartime history—such as War Relocation Authority concentration camps like Manzanar or Tule Lake—TCDS was short-lived, administered by Immigration and Naturalization Services, and, as such, processed Japanese, German, and Italian nationals from both the United States and Latin America. Eventually razed after World War II, the camp quickly faded from public memory. Burdened by a profound sense of shame and stigma, former detainees and their families rarely spoke of the camp.

Yet, on June 25, 2013, the Los Angeles City Council *unanimously* voted to support a motion by then-councilman Richard Alarcón to give the Tuna Canyon Detention Center a Historic Cultural Monument designation. This was the result of a concerted educational and public relations campaign by an unlikely alliance between diverse constituencies that emerged from a contested debate about the land upon which the former detention center sat. Unlike the desolate concentration camps found in California's deserts or Arkansas's back country, the Tuna Canyon site and the structures that later occupied the land formed the figurative backyard for generations of residents in the San Fernando and Crescenta Valleys. As such, the intricate spatial and racial histories of that space informed the messy and conflicted road to monument status. To outline this journey, I will briefly sketch the history of the land upon which the Tuna Canyon Detention Station and later the Verdugo Hills Golf Course (VHGC) sat and then rapidly move forward to the last few years

when a group that became known as the Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition formed and pushed for the designation. The story that follows draws upon secondary and primary sources, including accounts from local media, as well as my participant experiences as a founding member of the TCDS Coalition. Ultimately, this historical flashpoint illustrates the significance of *regional* political formation in historic preservation. I argue that the unanticipated sources of support for designation lay in the political geography of the Sunland-Tujunga community as well as the political trajectory of Councilman Alarcón, one of San Fernando Valley's best-known and most controversial politicians. The pathway to the designation brought together a disparate alliance of individuals: local residents weary of development, the defenders of a well-known golf course, and civil rights activists intent on commemorating a shameful chapter of the city's past. The diverse set of stakeholders helped raise awareness about the camp and secure the city's historic cultural designation, since none of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station's structures, except for a small oak grove, have survived to the present.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TCDS SITE

Nestled between the San Fernando and Crescenta Valleys on the northern border of the sprawling City of Los Angeles lies an expanse of land that has long resisted metropolitan development, even as the surrounding areas evolved from rural hinterlands to Cold War-era suburbs to sprawling cities within a city. The once-independent towns of Sunland and Tujunga were originally indigenous land, inhabited by the Tongva people. During the Mexican period, according to local lore, Californio bandit Tiburcio Vásquez used the area as a watering hole. By the 1930s, Los Angeles had annexed Sunland, Tujunga, and La Tuna Canyon following questionable elections, and small residential pockets had developed. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps, established to put young men to work, built a small camp to house the local CCC boys in this area. One inspector called Tuna Canyon a "fine camp setup" and praised the productivity of the workers.²

2. Weston M. Hicks, "Report on Tuna Canyon," March 18, 1934, in "Materials on California Labor Camps," Collection Number 493, Box 1, Folder 30, Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, UCLA.



1943 photograph of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station, picturing some of the Japanese American detainees behind barbed-wire-topped fencing, with two observation towers in the background and barracks on the right. *Photo used with the permission of David Scott, the Scott Family, and Little Landers Historical Society/Bolton Hall Museum, Tujunga, CA.*

However, almost immediately after Imperial Japan bombed American naval installations at Pu‘uloa (Pearl Harbor), Hawai‘i, on December 7, 1941, the Immigration and Naturalization Service took control of the camp and turned it into a processing site for so-called “enemy aliens” of Japanese, German, and Italian nationality who lived in Southern California. Federal agents detained well over one thousand men and a few women from as far south as San Diego and as far north as Santa Barbara County.³ Specifically, federal agents netted leaders of those immigrant communities whom they assumed might harbor nationalist sympathies and be susceptible to subversion: language-school teachers, martial-arts instructors, the leaders of ethnic organizations or farmers associations, and religious clergy.

3. The first roundup of aliens involved people from San Diego to Santa Barbara; later, the camp also processed Japanese Peruvians before they were sent to Kennedy INS Camp in Kennedy, Texas.

In the Japanese immigrant community, Jodo Shinshu Buddhist and Tenrikyo priests fell under particular scrutiny.⁴ Less than a week after the INS took over the Tuna Canyon CCC camp facility, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “the first busload of internees was conveyed to the former C.C.C. camp by a patrol car manned by deputy sheriffs.”⁵

Because of the transitory nature of the camp, detainees had very little knowledge about when or where the government would next transport them or how long they would be at the Tuna Canyon camp.⁶ The only certainty of their experience was their isolation from their families and community. The Reverend Daisho Tana, a priest with the Buddhist Mission of North America and a Japanese language teacher from Lompoc, recorded the pain and uncertainty that the Issei (the Japanese immigrant generation) detainees felt, unsure of their fate. As he stared out at the undeveloped landscape, Rev. Tana lamented to his diary, “We are prohibited to go within ten feet of the fence and it is most painful to be cut off from the outside world.”⁷ The only succor authorities afforded the internees was to permit brief visitation privileges from their families. Nevertheless, such ephemeral visits could not salve the sheer trauma of incarceration. “After thirty minutes of the visit,” Rev. Tana relayed to his diary, “I can see people’s eyes filled with tears—of those internees who are waving their hands good-bye as their visitors go to the distant parking area.” He continued: “And those who are in the camp might have just given up[,] but they can only touch their fingertips through the fence when they say goodbye [sic]. It makes their visitors appear to pity them. And

4. Unpublished research by Duncan Ryuken Williams, shared with Russell Endo, e-mail communication, May 7, 2015. Russell Endo is a professor emeritus of Sociology and Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado and a member of the TCDS Coalition. Relatives of his were detained at TCDS. The email, which Endo also forwarded to other members of the TCDS Coalition, is in the author’s possession.

5. “C.C.C. Camp Houses Aliens: Tuna Canyon Property Commandeered by Army; First Internees Arrive,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1941.

6. Some detainees were transferred to Department of Justice camps in places such as Fort Missoula, Montana, or the Santa Fe Internment Camp in New Mexico after being interviewed by government officials. After the War Relocation Authority (WRA) set up incarceration facilities such as Manzanar, some Tuna Canyon detainees were sent to them.

7. Rev. Daisho Tana, diary entry for March 15, 1942, quoted in Danica Kirka, “Healing Wounds of War: Archives Tell Story of INS Camps for Civilians Held as Enemies,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1995, 3.

it seems that the people in my barracks did not feel well after that meeting. I think it is not kindness at all to the internees to let them meet with their families and friends without giving them satisfaction.”⁸ However, these brief meetings provided a fleeting sense of normalcy in an otherwise precarious situation.

Despite these circumstances, anecdotal evidence nevertheless suggests that the camp administrator, Merrill Scott, treated the detainees with dignity and facilitated efforts for them to make collective decisions about day-to-day life in the camp regarding spaces such as the mess hall, barracks, and post exchange.⁹ His sympathy, however, could not shield them from uncertain futures as the government transferred some Issei to Department of Justice camps, others to War Relocation Authority (WRA) concentration camps. Even before Japan surrendered and the federal government loosened its constraints on Japanese Americans, the Tuna Canyon camp had faded into the past. It had ceased operations by October 1943.

The land upon which the Tuna Canyon Detention Station once stood represents, in many respects, a microhistory of the spatial development of the region after World War II. After the camp closed, the County of Los Angeles took control of the land, razed the guard towers, and built the La Tuna Canyon Boys Probation Camp Number 31126, which closed in 1954.¹⁰ By 1960, a group of doctors had purchased the land and turned it into that ultimate amenity for those aspiring to upward mobility in the era of post-war prosperity: a golf course. The Verdugo Hills Golf Course quickly became a popular gathering place for local residents of the Sunland-Tujunga area, which, despite retaining much of a rural cultural landscape, began to fill in with tract housing, much like the rest of the San Fernando Valley. Within this context of residential growth and lingering shame over the wartime experience for those detained for nothing but their ethnicity and nationality, the history and memory of Tuna Canyon was largely buried.

Although local residents and inveterate historians, such as Paul Tsuneishi and Dr. Lloyd Hitt, doggedly fought to uncover any scraps

8. Quoted in Danica Kirka, “Documents Offer Glimpse of WWII Detention Center,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1995, 1.

9. Lloyd Hitt, “History,” Tuna Canyon Detention Station brochure, 2015.

10. Lloyd Hitt, personal communication with author, March 22, 2016.



Nestled in its namesake hills, at the intersection of La Tuna Canyon Road and Tujunga Canyon Boulevard, next to the 210 Freeway, the Verdugo Hills Golf Course has been a recreation spot for local golfers for almost six decades. In the 1930s, it was the site of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. During World War II, it was the site of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station, holding Japanese, German, and Italian immigrant Americans suspected of disloyalty. *Courtesy of photographer Susan Colosimo.*

of TCDS's past, its history remained untold. In the 1990s the federal government declassified wartime documents related to the camp, and more details about its past slowly emerged. A handful of articles about the camp appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1990s and scholars such as Tetsuden Kashima included Tuna Canyon in larger studies of wartime incarceration.¹¹ Yet, for most Angelenos, the history of TCDS burst into the public consciousness just in the past few years when the VHGC's property owners, Snowball West Investments, L.P., purchased the golf course in 2004 and then announced plans to close it, claiming that the verdant site of leisure and community was in fact hemorrhaging money. In 2007 Snowball West filed a zoning application to redevelop the property as a dense residential tract. The deeper history of local resistance to development provides

11. Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

the unique context in which historic preservation of the site of TCDS became a visible effort.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF SUNLAND-TUJUNGA

Close-knit communities in the San Fernando Valley foothill such as Sunland-Tujunga, Shadow Hills, Sylmar, and Lake View Terrace have long cultivated a collective consciousness regarding any perceived threats to their neighborhoods, whether in the form of metropolitan development or an over-reaching downtown Los Angeles City Hall. Whereas economic restructuring and demographic changes hastened the end of low-density *Leave It to Beaver*-style suburbia in many sections of the neighboring San Fernando Valley by the 1990s, residents of the Sunland-Tujunga area fought vigorously to preserve their small-town landscape.¹²

As Laura Barraclough highlights in *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege*, homeowners argued that their “rural and equestrian lifestyle was affirmed and constructed as a special, endangered culture . . .” in the face of both urban development and political redistricting.¹³ Community activists generally couched these struggles in the language of slow growth or anti-development; in some unfortunate moments, race and xenophobia tinged public discourse. For example, tensions erupted in 2002 (when the San Fernando Valley attempted to break away from the City of Los Angeles, with great support from the foothill communities) over competing land usage surrounding Hansen Dam, where a handful of white equestrian residents clashed with Latinas/os who parked in the neighborhood to fish and picnic by the dam and waterways.¹⁴ A few years later, Lloyd Hitt was one of those involved in the fight to keep a Home Depot, a big box home improvement chain, out of Sunland, primarily focusing on its potential consequences: detrimental impact on local businesses, vehicular pollution, and general damage to the environment.¹⁵ Yet at one oft-reported public forum,

12. Laura R. Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

13. *Ibid.*, 235.

14. See Barraclough, chap. 8, “‘Rural Culture’ and Multiculturalism.”

15. Sunland was approximately 65 percent white at the time, “Sunland,” *Los Angeles Times Mapping L.A.*, n.d., <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/sunland/#ethnicity>, last accessed on July 5, 2015.

the public debate turned “into a shouting match over [Latino] day laborers and immigration,” that represented anxieties over threats to the bucolic (i.e., white, middle-class) social geography of the region.¹⁶ Ultimately, because the Home Depot corporation refused to submit an Environmental Impact Report, the neighborhood’s representative in City Hall, Wendy Greuel, succeeded in garnering unanimous support among her City Council colleagues to block plans to construct the store.¹⁷

Los Angeles City Council redistricting in 2012 also laid bare political tensions in the small-town foothill communities that resisted development. From 2001 to 2012, the Sunland-Tujunga neighborhood was embedded in the Second Council District, which included a patchwork of San Fernando Valley communities that ranged from the affluent Valley Village and Studio City to economically and racially diverse neighborhoods such as Van Nuys, Mission Hills, and Panorama City. Wendy Greuel was a popular councilwoman who gained the favor of many foothill residents because in 2004 she successfully urged Snowball West, the property company, to keep the golf course in operation, after the company first announced plans to build 320 condominiums or a 300,000-square-foot commercial facility on the site. Bowing to pressure from the community and Greuel, the developers changed their plans to retain a portion of the golf course adjacent to 269 condominiums. However, three years later, Snowball West disclosed new plans to build a development of 229 single-family houses.¹⁸ Greuel’s successor, Paul Krekorian, calling the golf course “a cultural treasure,” also served the interests of Sunland-Tujunga residents when he helped shepherd Proposition O, a 2004 city-wide ballot initiative to authorize the city government to fund projects related to protecting and cleaning waterways. His plan would have built a water treatment facility on the golf course property, thus

16. Rong-Gong Lin II, “Home Depot’s Foes Win a Round in Sunland; Store Plans to Appeal,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2007. Critics of the Home Depot argue that the corporation itself manipulated the situation into one over race (Hitt personal communication).

17. David Zahniser, “Home Depot Sues L.A. over Store in Sunland-Tujunga,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2007.

18. “Background: The Verdugo Hills Golf Course,” V.O.I.C.E. Volunteers Organized in Conserving the Environment Website, n.d., <http://gcvoice.org/background/>, last accessed May 6, 2016; “Timeline,” V.O.I.C.E. Volunteers Organized in Conserving the Environment Website, n.d., <http://gcvoice.org/verdugo-hills-golf-course/timeline/>, last accessed May 6, 2016.

saving it from development. This never came to fruition due to lack of funding.¹⁹

Concerns about the future of the Verdugo Hills Golf Course continued in the midst of the much contested process of redrawing the city's council districts in 2012. As one element of the redistricting process, Sunland-Tujunga was reassigned to the Seventh City Council District, led by long-time civil servant Richard Alarcón.²⁰ The new district, in which Sunland-Tujunga still sits, is primarily Latina/o and includes the working-class neighborhoods of Pacoima and Arleta, among others. Because of Alarcón's controversial past, which included moving between the City Council, the State Senate, and the State Assembly, as well as living outside of his council district, his newest constituents in Sunland-Tujunga often met him with suspicion.²¹

Dogged by his residency scandal and recoiling from a failed bid for the State Assembly in 2012, Alarcón quietly wound down his term in office on the council. Nevertheless, and despite previous unpopularity, the community held hopes that he, like his predecessors, could assist in anti-development efforts around the VHGC. Meanwhile, through the local activists, Alarcón's office became aware of stories about some type of "Japanese internment camp" on the VHGC site. His staff, led by Chief Planning Deputy Gerald Gubatan, along with long-time Sunland-Tujunga community organizer Mary Benson, proceeded to search out efforts to recognize this buried past. One option, bestowed upon spaces that ranged from aged adobes from the Spanish occupation of California to midcentury Googie-style restaurants, was a Los Angeles City Historic Cultural Monument designation. According to the Los Angeles Administrative code, the definition of a city monument is:

Any site (including significant trees or other plant life located on the site), building or structure of particular historic or cultural significance to the City of Los Angeles, including historic structures or sites in which the broad cultural, economic or social history of the nation, State or community is reflected or exemplified; or which is identified with historic

19. Mark Kellam, "Water Could Change Verdugo's Course," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2011.

20. "Redistricting Map Shakes Up L.A. Political Landscape," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 2012.

21. Simone Wilson, "The Five Most Furious Reactions to the Redistricting of Los Angeles," *LA Weekly*, January 31, 2012.

personages or with important events in the main currents of national, State or local history; or which embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction; or a notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age.²²

Although none of the camp buildings remained, and despite the overwhelming focus on architectural elements for most designations, Councilman Alarcón was confident in the historical significance of the camp and made the bold decision to call for the entire golf course site to be placed on the monuments register.²³ This was a lofty goal since all of the camp's physical elements had been demolished by the 1960s whereas the vast majority of city-declared monuments are standing structures.²⁴ Consequently, Lloyd Hitt, the longtime resident and preservationist who helped secure historic-cultural monument status for Weatherwolde Castle and other sites in Sunland-Tujunga, strongly urged Alarcón to only designate a single acre, such as the site of the oak trees that were present when the camp was in use.²⁵ Debate over the precise acreage of land for the monument status persisted as the supporters continued to publicize the history of Tuna Canyon.

Media coverage was another element. While coverage for TCDS preservation was generally neutral in larger publications such as the *Los Angeles Times*, reporter Mark Kellam wrote articles on the issue for both the *Times* and the *Glendale News-Press*. Blogs such as *Mayor Sam's Sister City*, whose name references the conservative former mayor of Los Angeles, Sam Yorty, often ran pieces critical of the development project on the golf course (while taking jabs at Richard

22. Section 22.171.7. "Definition of Monument," *Official City of Los Angeles Charter and City Code*, available at: <https://law.resource.org/pub/us/code/city/ca/LosAngeles/Administrative/division22.pdf>.

23. Mark Kellam, "Alarcon Suggests Making Verdugo Hills Golf Course a Historic Site," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 2012, last accessed May 16, 2016 at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/29/local/la-me-golf-course-20121029>.

24. The most updated list of Historic Cultural Monuments is available at <http://preservation.lacity.org/sites/default/files/HCMDatabase%23021916.pdf> (last updated February 19, 2016).

25. Lloyd Hitt, personal communication with author, March 22, 2016. Hitt is a fascinating character. He settled in Sunland-Tujunga after World War II and is a veteran of the Korean War. He opened a pharmacy that operated in the neighborhood for generations, and he took on many roles as local historian and preservationist, particularly as president of the Little Landers Historical Society.

Alarcón).²⁶ The TCDS Coalition often relied on coverage of its activities in the ethnic press, especially the *Rafu Shimpo*, the oldest Japanese American newspaper in Los Angeles.²⁷ Ellen Endo, a former editor of *Rafu Shimpo*, was an early supporter of the coalition. Southern California Public Radio (KPCC) also provided sympathetic coverage from its politics and “Housing and Changing Neighborhoods” desks.²⁸

THE TCDS COALITION

Here lie the complicated roots of the journey to secure an HCM designation for Tuna Canyon: did people support the designation as a means to save the golf course, to resist dense development, or to recognize and bring to light a tortured chapter of our collective past or, perhaps, all three? For some residents or observers, the former rang true, as evidenced by headlines such as “History Could Save Verdugo Hills Golf Course,” which ran in the October 28, 2012, *Glendale News Press*.²⁹

Although some locals and news reporters may have conflated efforts to save the golf course with preservation of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station, a diverse core group of supporters emerged to

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26. “Details of Tujunga Golf Course Developer Lawsuit Emerge,” *Mayor Sam’s Sister City: Home of Los Angeles Politics*, August 10, 2013, last accessed June 16, 2016 at: <http://mayorsam.blogspot.com/2013/08/details-of-tujunga-golf-course.html>. This particular post included a “meme” that featured an image of a crestfallen Alarcón with the caption, “Don’t Cry for Me Sunland-Tujunga: I Still Need Your Love After All That I’ve Done.”
27. In addition to coverage by *Rafu Shimpo* reporters, the newspaper published my own plea for designation, see Jean-Paul R. deGuzman, “Remembering a Sad Chapter: Historic Designation Is Still Sought for the Former Tuna Canyon Detention Station,” *Rafu Shimpo*, May 18, 2013.
28. Mark Kellam, “History Could Save Verdugo Hills Golf Course,” *Glendale News-Press*, October 28, 2012, last accessed on July 5, 2012 at http://articles.glendalenewspress.com/2012-10-28/news/tn-gnp-1029-history-could-save-course_1_golf-course-site-detention-center-alarcon, and “Water Could Change Verdugo’s Course,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 2012; Josie Huang, “Japanese-Americans Seek Historic Status for Tuna Canyon Detention Station,” Southern California Public Radio, June 20 2013, available at: <http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2013/06/20/32339/japanese-americans-seek-historic-status-for-tuna-c/>. Neither Kellam nor Huang were members of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition, though.
29. Kellam, “History Could Save Verdugo Hills Golf Course.” Similar articles include Tanja M. Laden, “This L.A. Golf Course Was an Internment Camp. Should It Get Historic Monument Status,” *L.A. Weekly*, April 24, 2013, last accessed on May 6, 2016 at: <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/this-la-golf-course-was-an-internment-camp-should-it-get-historic-monument-status-4180244>; and Nichole Charky, “Verdugo Hills Golf Course May Have Time on Its Side,” *Montrose-La Crescenta Patch*, October 29, 2012, last accessed on May 6, 2016 at <http://patch.com/california/montrose/verdugo-hills-golf-course-tuna-canyon-detention-japan078215f498>. Charky’s piece was subtitled: “The Verdugo Hills Golf Course could reverse a large housing plan by becoming a historical monument. The site is the former Tuna Canyon Detention Center [sic] and was used as detention center for Japanese Americans in the early 1940s.”



On June 21, 2013, a busload of TCDS Coalition members wearing red shirts attended a Los Angeles City Council meeting to show support for Councilman Alarcón's motion to designate the entire Verdugo Hills Golf Course property a Historic Cultural Monument. Coalition member Haru Kuromiya is second from the right in the front row. *Author's photo, with permission of Haru Kuromiya.*

focus solely on uncovering the history of the camp and sharing it with the larger public. The TCDS Coalition included veteran civil rights activists from the Japanese American community who were equipped with the strategic knowledge of preservation campaigns, local residents interested in the camp's past, and various educators such as myself. The coalition met to discuss means to spread awareness about the camp and to lobby members of the City Council in support of Councilman Alarcón's HCM motion through letter-writing, direct meetings, and petitions.³⁰ The coalition began meeting in the spring of 2013, largely through word of mouth. The core group of members

30. Using the popular online petition platform www.change.org, I created the "Grant historical/cultural landmark status to the former site of TCDS" petition, which garnered over 1400 signatures; see: <https://www.change.org/p/la-city-planning-and-land-use-management-committee-and-the-la-city-council-grant-historical-cultural-landmark-status-to-the-former-site-of-tc-ds>. The TCDS Coalition forwarded the signatures to the LA City Council.

included staffers from Alarcón's office, Sunland-Tujunga community activists such as Hitt and Benson, as well as filmmaker Joe Barrett, and attorney Claudia Culling. Individuals affiliated with groups such as Volunteers Organized in Conserving the Environment (VOICE), an organization dedicated to saving the golf course, joined the meetings. As news of the campaign spread to the Japanese American community, representatives from the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center (SFVJACC) and the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Citizens League (SFVJACL), as well as an assortment of veterans of other preservation campaigns (most notably, Manzanar) also joined. In the days and months leading up to the city council motion, the coalition was largely informal and there was no formal membership. This was a strength inasmuch as it brought together a wide cross-section of interested parties. With the exception of long-dedicated individuals such as Lloyd Hitt, however, many coalition members were learning more and more about the history of the camp as they were trying to preserve it. Further, the diversity of voices often meant there was space for confusion over the exact goals of the Historic Cultural Monument designation. For representatives of the different ethnic communities who were imprisoned in Tuna Canyon, there could be no mistake: designation would bring greater attention to the injustices of wartime prejudice and serve as a powerful reminder to ensure such actions would not occur again.³¹

Still, it is important to note that the TCDS Coalition truly did represent a variety of objectives. When I accompanied a group of supporters to a Los Angeles City Council meeting on June 21, 2013, to cheer on Councilman Alarcón's motion, I overheard well-meaning Sunland-Tujunga residents chatting with each other about how dearly they held the golf course. They would do anything to save the golf course.

31. As time went on the TCDS Coalition worked to reach out to the local German American and Italian American communities. For example, Hans Eberhard of the German American Tricentennial Foundation sits on the TCDS Coalition board, and Dr. Sigird Banzhaf Toye has spoken at TCDS functions about her father, who was detained during World War II. The coalition often consults Mariana Gatto, the executive director of the Italian American Museum for its educational activities.

THE CASE OF RICHARD ALARCÓN AND THE JAPANESE
AMERICAN COMMUNITY

As debates over the future of the VHGC and Councilman Alarcón's motion bled into local media, the blogosphere, and elsewhere, the discourse over the relationship between the golf course and the camp focused on the perceived disingenuousness of the designation of the entire golf course rather than the one acre Hitt had recommended. Some critics alleged that Alarcón was simply standing in the way of development, while others claimed that he betrayed the residents of Sunland-Tujunga by not doing more to save the golf course. Others thought that it was distasteful to use the history of TCDS as a ploy in development politics.³²

However, it is instructive to examine how Alarcón's own regional political trajectory informed his decision to fight for TCDS. Richard Alarcón is a son of the San Fernando Valley and his biography is well-known among LA City Hall watchers. He taught in Valley schools, served as an aide in the administration of Tom Bradley, and eventually became the first Latino elected to the City Council from the San Fernando Valley. Due to term limits, he moved from the Council to the State Senate, the State Assembly, and then back to the Council. Because of redistricting, he still drew support from the large blue-collar, Latino, and heavily immigrant environs of the East San Fernando Valley; yet, he also represented the fiercely tight-knit, slow-growth neighborhood of Sunland-Tujunga during his second, and last, tenure on the Council.

What observers generally miss from his biography are his roots in a *multiethnic* community in Pacoima that was shut out of the rest of the San Fernando Valley through racially restrictive covenants or outright harassment and violence. As he eloquently articulated in the "horseshoe" of the Council chamber,³³ he grew up among Mexican American families and Japanese Americans. His youth took him to the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center, where he learned judo, and his early career rested in part upon

32. Joseph Mailander, "Richard Alarcon Hoodwinks Sunland-Tujunga One Final Time," *City Watch: Politics, Perspectives, Participation*, June 24, 2013, last accessed on June 16, 2016 at: <http://www.citywatchla.com/index.php/archive/5287-richard-alarcon-hoodwinks-sunland-tujunga-one-final-time>.

33. Referring to the formal seating arrangement on the dais of city council chamber, so that all fifteen council members are visible to the audience.

support from the enduring Japanese American, or Nikkei, community in the East Valley. As a legislator he consistently volunteered resources to the SFVJACC.³⁴ Furthermore, as a civil servant and later a city solon, he cultivated a longtime relationship with Rose Matsui Ochi, a well-known Japanese American attorney and civil rights activist who served as a deputy under Mayor Bradley and on the Police Commission following an appointment by Mayor James Hahn.³⁵ Lastly, in a June 10, 2013, letter to the City Council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee that grounded his support for the motion within the larger context of his relationship to the Japanese American community, Alarcón insisted, "Monument designation will not stop future redevelopment but will ensure that a portion of the site is set aside to commemorate history and promote education about injustice and civil liberties for future generations."³⁶ Thus, while his original call for preserving the entire golf-course site (instead of the one-acre portion advocated by Hitt), which had appeared to prioritize golf-course preservation and opposition to development, his June 10 letter, mentioning "a portion of the site," reveals TCDS as his main objective.

Indeed, as the campaign for the HCM moved forward through the spring and summer of 2013—which included lobbying members of the City Council's Cultural Heritage Commission, Planning and Land Use Management Committee, and Council members at large—Alarcón's office made it clear that his support for the designation had *nothing* to do with resisting development. His field deputies instructed those of us who became the TCDS Coalition that our efforts to raise awareness should in no way suggest that the HCM designation might forestall development. Although critics may have questioned the timing of the HCM designation as suspiciously too close to efforts to fight development, the coalition responded that the fate of the Verdugo Hills Golf Course helped facilitate greater discussion of the site, which coincided with greater access to wartime records of the camp.³⁷

34. Richard Alarcón, Letter to the Members of the Planning and Land Use Management Committee, Los Angeles City Council, June 10, 2013. Available at: http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2012/12-1625_misc_a_6-11-13.pdf

35. Rose Matsui Ochi, "Richard Alarcon and Tuna Canyon," *Rafu Shimpo*, August 5, 2014.

36. Alarcón, Letter to Members of the Planning and Land Use Management Committee.

37. Notes by author, taken at May 17, 2013, TCDS Coalition meeting, LA City Hall.

Other political figures and wider public support was gathered by the coalition. During their meetings in spring 2013, coalition members collectively decided who would be best suited to reach out to various politicians. Sometimes staffers with council offices would reach out to their colleagues to gain access to other council members. Neighborhood Council activists who had experience working with City Hall reached out to their respective representatives. Some politicians, such as County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, had been supporters of preserving the golf course, as evidenced by his efforts to use Proposition O monies to halt development. As a result of the coalition's organizing work, HCM designation gained support from, among others, Congressman Adam Schiff and State Senator Carol Liu, as well as the presidents of the Italian American Museum, the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center, and the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California. Several academics wrote letters of support, while the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Tuna Canyon detainees stepped forward to provide much-needed narratives to a period of time that had long been shrouded in utter silence in their families. Over one thousand individuals added their names to the petition, with many attesting to their previous lack of knowledge about the site. In public hearings before the City Council, members of the TCDS Coalition came out in full force to support Councilman Alarcón, while well-known City Hall figures such as Rose Ochi testified on behalf of the HCM designation.

DESIGNATION AND BACKLASH

Support for the designation rapidly ran up against time, as Councilman Alarcón's term in City Hall approached its end on July 1, 2013. Coalition members worried that the general turnover on the Council would result in a defeat of the motion. Furthermore, the lack of extant camp buildings continued to hamper efforts to gain official support for the designation. Ken Bernstein, the manager of the Office of Historic Resources, was sympathetic to supporters of Tuna Canyon but noted that "All of the buildings that were associated with the internment camp were removed" and thus "the site no longer had an ability to convey those very important historic associations."³⁸ The chance for passage looked grim in April 2013 when members of the

38. Quoted in Huang, "Japanese-Americans Seek Historic Status for Tuna Canyon Detention Station."



Map showing the Verdugo Hills Golf Course, its parking lot and clubhouse (trapezoid on left side of parking lot), with the L-shaped one-acre area comprising the oak grove that was designated Los Angeles City Historic Cultural Monument #1039 on June 25, 2013. Map by Alexander McLaughlin.

Cultural Heritage Commission, the civilian body linked to Bernstein's office, voted against Alarcón's motion for preserving the entire golf-course acreage.³⁹ Subsequently, the vote before the council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee resulted in a tie. Committee members hesitated to vote for the motion due to the lack of physical structures dating to the operation of the Tuna Canyon Detention Center and criticized plans to designate the *entire* golf course an HCM. On June 10, Alarcón submitted his letter attesting to TCDS preservation as his primary motive and, as a shrewd bargainer, mentioning only "a portion of the site." In a procedural loophole, Alarcón bypassed the recommendation of the committee and, as his staffers packed up his office, he called a vote on the council floor on June 21. Supporters were unsure of the fate of that tactic since Snowball West had gone into a defensive posture. Attorneys for the property corporation stated that they absolutely endorsed any efforts to *commemorate* TCDS, but would not accept any official municipal designation lest it interfere with their development efforts. After a tense hour or so of backroom negotiations—during which various council members shared platitudes and their bona fides regarding Japanese American preservation—Alarcón returned with an altered motion. He would propose only designating one acre of the land for the monument, with a specific reference to the camp's existing oak groves.⁴⁰ This compromise satisfied other council members and, after a short delay, the motion received unanimous support on June 25, 2013.

Despite this cause for celebration, and the continued efforts of the coalition (which recently received a National Parks Service Grant in 2015 to fund a travelling exhibition that features historic photographs, newspapers, and biographies of detainees), Snowball West has not relented. The company continues to view the designation as an impediment to current and future development.⁴¹ The TCDS Coalition advocated for designation precisely so that the land could

39. See Cultural Heritage Committee Letter to Los Angeles City Council regarding Case Number CHC-2013-844-HCM, April 29, 2013, available at: http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2012/12-1625_rpt_chc_04-29-2013.pdf.

40. The full text of the amended motion, which includes the handwritten specification of the oak grove as the location of the one acre HCM, is available at: http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2012/12-1625_mot_6-21-2013.pdf.

41. "Tuna Canyon Lawsuit Going to Court," *Rafu Shimpo*, November 4, 2014.

be protected in the event that Snowball West could one day reverse its decision to commemorate the camp or simply sell the property outright to a firm that may have no consideration for the history of the site. In fact, Snowball West has filed a lawsuit, which is still pending, against the city to remove the designation.⁴²

CONCLUSION: REGIONAL POLITICAL FORMATION AND STRANGE BED FELLOWS

How did it come to pass that a coalition of anti-development warriors, civil rights activists, golfers, and everyday residents came to support a motion to shed light on one of our nation's darkest chapters of history? It seems ironic at first, but that turn of events speaks to the complexity and significance of regional political formation in the preservation process. Unlike concentration camps such as Manzanar—whose abundant textual, visual, tactile, and human archives burst with stories to tell—Tuna Canyon was nearly lost to the dustbin of history. It was only recently that we began to find the documents and that descendants spoke up. I have friends I have known for over a decade who have only now spoken about their family's tragic connection to TCDS. Taken together, this diffuse history meant that the hyperlocal histories of spatial development, local politics, and social geography played unanticipated, but important roles, in the pathway to HCM recognition for Tuna Canyon.

This story only captures, with broad brushstrokes, one example of preservation activism, among many. Nevertheless, the convergence of the history of anti-development in Sunland-Tujunga, the formation of a coalition of activists, and the history of the nearby multiethnic neighborhood that produced the controversial Richard Alarcón illustrates how local contexts inform and pivot preservation processes. To be sure, the most ardent Sunland-Tujunga supporters of Tuna Canyon have a sincere passion for its history (just as Mr. Alarcón's advocacy lay in a past where Japanese Americans were friends, neighbors, and teachers). Yet, if it were not for the slightly misguided view that HCM designation could forestall the closure of a much-loved golf course, heightened visibility for TCDS and the

42. See Snowball West Investments L.P. v. The City of Los Angeles et al., case number not available, in Superior Court of the State of California, County of Los Angeles. The full text of the lawsuit is available on the Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition's website at: <http://www.tunacanyon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/TCDS-Lawsuit.pdf>.

potential to share with the public the significance of its past alone may not have succeeded. But on the other hand, to some critics more concerned with the VHGC, Alarcón's one-acre designation was but one more indignity for the residents of Sunland-Tujunga.⁴³

Nevertheless, historians love unanticipated consequences. And indeed, when a likely well-meaning journalist suggested that "history" could save Verdugo Hills Golf Course, little did he know that the golf course would actually help save the history of Tuna Canyon Detention Station.

43. Mailander of the *City Watch Blog* caustically writes, for example, "...when the community of Sunland-Tujunga sees Caterpillars plowing and grading the 96% of the golf course that will be devoted to new development, they will also be able to observe how the 4% of the course devoted to adding a thirteenth Japanese detention historic site to a register of historic places was meant to stand, not as an obstruction to new development, but as part and parcel of it," "Richard Alarcon Hoodwinks Sunland-Tujunga One Final Time."