

GOTHAM HISTORY BLOTTER

QUEENS' MEMORIES

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By Christine Parker

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Women at St. Michael's Church in Flushing, Queens, prior to the start of the "La Naval de Manila" procession and ceremony

One of the hallmarks of the borough of Queens, New York is its incredible cultural diversity. Walk down any street or neighborhood and you will quickly encounter a language or custom other than your own. This diversity is part of what informs the identity of local communities and makes the tale of their history a rich tapestry weaving together different voices and stories into one. In order to preserve that history for future generations, those voices are now being recorded and made available to the public in a unique archive of collective memory known as the Queens Memory Project (QMP).

The project seeks to innovate as digital archives for audio and visual records presenting both contemporary and historical materials to create a unified portrait of the history of Queens. Oral history interviews have played an important role since the project's inception, since they can directly record the memories of current residents reflecting upon how their communities have changed over time. Each oral history brings a unique voice into the stream of the historical record and provides the personal, rich details that bring archival materials to life.



Annalou Christensen with her younger brother and sister in the Waldheim neighborhood where

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they grew up

Interviews in the collection include those of Annalou Christensen (née McQuilling, 1918-2011). She grew up in the Waldheim neighborhood of Flushing during the era of the Great Depression, and had a wealth of memories that she was willing to share with the Queens Memory Project. In one interview on the history of movie theaters in Flushing, Annalou recalled the Janus movie theater on Main Street and Northern Boulevard nicknamed the “Itch and Scratch”. It was broken down, and probably earned its nickname from the bug infestations. The boys used to go there because it showed cowboy movies. There was also the Prospect Theatre which showed MGM movies, and the Taft Theatre. Christensen went to the first screening at RKO Keith’s Theatre of the movie, “In Old Arizona,” and recalled how the theater was designed with a Spanish style open courtyard. Annalou shared these and many other memories in her interviews, which can be browsed as part of the QMP collection.

Yet oral histories are only a part of what the Queens Memory Project has to offer. Digitized historical photographs, maps, news clippings and other rare archival records from the holdings of both Queens College and Queens Library are included to provide an enriching context for the contemporary materials. Director Natalie Milbrodt says of the project: “We hope to provide a gathering place for the stories, images and other artifacts that tell the story of contemporary Queens. We also hope to bring attention to the rich holdings in our public archives. These materials belong to the people of Queens and they document our lives here in the borough.”



“Save Flushing River”
button, part of the
Ephemera Collection at
The Archives at Queens
Library

The Queens Library archival holdings within the QMP include photographs, maps, news clippings, personal papers, ephemera, and other holdings. This round lapel button that advocates saving the Flushing River (properly known as Flushing Creek) dates from the early 1970s. The creek has been infamous for its pollution over the years and had a landfill created on its west bank by the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company in the mid-19th century. This dump site was most famously remembered in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* as the “valley of ashes.” The button remains as one source of memory for this portion of Queens’ past. The Postcard Collection at The Archives at Queens Library has also contributed a great number of items to the Queens Memory Project, which includes historic images and artwork from all over the borough.

Current events in Queens are also being documented in image and sound as they happen in order to unite the contemporary with the historical. “La Naval De Manila” ceremony and procession took place in Flushing on October 3, 2010. The Queens Memory Project was there to document the event through photographs, sound recordings, and collected ephemera. This ceremony is an important observance in the Filipino community which commemorates a series of naval battles fought in the Philippines in the 1600s between Spanish and Dutch forces. These battles ultimately prevented the Dutch from invading the country and the Virgin Mary was invoked as the cause of the resulting triumph. Today the festivities of “La Naval de Manila” honor both Mary and the miraculous series of victories attributed to her intercession. The 2010 event was hosted by St. Michael’s Church, in Flushing where the formal procession started and then traveled onto Union Street, 41st Avenue, and Parsons Boulevard before returning to the church for a ceremony and socials.



“La Naval de Manila” procession in Flushing, Queens

The public face of the Queens Memory Project is its website which officially launches this fall and is currently accessible at <http://www.queensmemory.org>. This resource allows historians, researchers, and residents alike to access the digital objects within the collection through one user-friendly online location. One of the foundational goals of the project has been to increase access and to make public records more public. Each record will be available through the site for review and interaction with an easy to use tag and comment system. Visitors can add to the conversation and enhance what they find – resulting in a true collaboration between archives and the communities they serve.

“For years, people from all over the world have come to Queens to make a living, raise a family and experience the American and New York dream,” says John Hyslop, Digital Assets Manager, Archives at Queens Library. “QMP’s ability to capture this diverse population through the oral tradition and raise awareness of it through QMP’s interactive website, is incredible. The Queens Library is thrilled to be a part of such an interesting project and looks forward to its success.”

The Queens Memory Project is a new and exciting initiative. Its efforts to unify otherwise scattered archival materials and personal stories in one searchable site of collective memory are harnessing the power of technology to increase access to these unique materials of historical value. Never before have the contemporary and the historical been used to archive the memories of a community in real-time in order to preserve that memory for future generations. Through such proactive captures and contextualization of materials, the Queens Memory Project hopes to lead the way into a future that makes sure its memories will remain a part of history.