

Queens Memory Project Sets Stage To Capture, Preserve Borough's Past

By JASON BANREY

Rising out of the swamp and ash dumps of what was once a desolate and deserted area, Flushing Meadows Corona Park became a sight to see in 1939.

From a barren wasteland, Robert Moses, one of the nation's most prolific urban planners, carved from a wasteland his very own international spectacle, which gave more than 44 million spectators a glimpse of "the world of tomorrow," right here in the county of Queens.

From a population of a little over one million residents who helped play host to that great World's Fair of 1939, Queens is now more than double in size and boasts a community of the most ethnically diverse denizens in the nation, if not the world.

Today, many of the borough residents cannot recall those days of just 80 years ago — most of us are either immigrants or the children of immigrants, so it is not woven into our family's history. Although the searing heat of that grand opening day of April 1939 will always resonate as one magnificent moment in the minds of scores of individuals who once lived to see it, that generation is fading, and it is unclear if the memories they carry will pass to future generations.

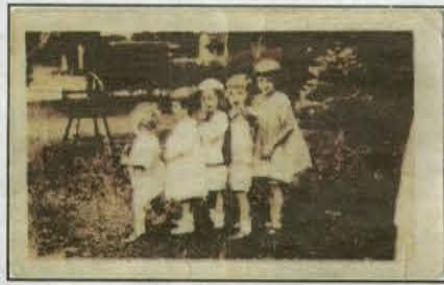
That is about to change.

The Project Begins

In the 1920s, before the borough's first World's Fair was even a glimmer in Moses' eye, Annalou Christensen was whisked from her home on West 14th Street in Manhattan by her father to live in Waldheim, Queens, a neighborhood in the process of being developed for wealthy families as a summer getaway.

"When we came there were dirt roads," said Christensen of the surrounding area of her home, which stood on Cherry Avenue at the northern end of Smart Street, just a couple of blocks from Flushing Hospital.

"This was an area of summer homes. Traveling from Manhattan was a long journey," she said. Today, it's only a 20-minute trip to downtown Flushing from our island neighbor.



A photograph of Annalou Christensen from 1924 is available to viewers who log on to the Queens Memory Project Web site.

Christensen's memory, of a Flushing which once was, remains with us today even after her passing, and is the first of what some hope to be the beginning of a vast collection of oral histories donated by the borough's residents to become a part of the unprecedented undertaking now known as the Queens Memory Project.

What began as an independent study project has laid the foundation for a creative and interactive process that is capturing the borough's history seen through the eyes of our oldest residents before their recollection slips through the cracks of time.

One year ago, as a Special Collections and Archives Fellow in the Queens College Libraries, Natalie Milbrodt, now director of the project, single-handedly began conducting interviews, recording history as it was remembered by its participants of the past.

With a \$25,000 grant from the Metropolitan New York Library Council in 2010, Milbrodt was able to establish collaboration with the Archives of the Queens Library. With the funds and a team of able student archivists, Milbrodt was able to combine images, interviews and records, to form the first-ever digital archive of contemporary and historical records of life in the borough.

Harnessing Web 2.0 technology, the Queens Memory Project's Web site, queensmemoryproject.org, allows visitors to contribute their own photographs, sounds and videos in a project Queens'

Borough President Helen Marshall said "will go a long way in restoring our collective memories by depositing them in one place."

The Library Helps

Nearly a century ago, the Archives at the Queen Library began a similar quest by collecting any and all materials, documenting the natural, social, economic and political history of Long Island's four counties: Queens, Kings, Nassau and Suffolk.

As the library's special collections continued increasing, the 115-year-old institution became recognized as one of the nation's preeminent resources for Long Island research.

Along the way, the emergence of the digital age presented itself as a viable tool to retain historical artifacts and documents for newer generations smitten by the popularity and availability of the home computer. But in the 90s, as Queens Library officials and local historical societies seriously began to discuss digitizing the vast collection the institution had amassed, plans were quashed due to a lack of resources and the always looming constraints to the library's budget.

Today, the borough's Central Library, located in Jamaica, is home to the Digital Assets Management department, which has been actively digitally capturing and preserving its century-old archives, which it soon will display on its own interactive Web site. The *Queens Tribune* is proud to have its entire history as part of the library's digital archive.

"With the Queens Memory Project providing an introduction of displaying contemporary information, it will help draw people into what we have been doing here," said John Hyslop, Digital Assets Manager at the Queens Library. "It also provides us with a venue to draw young people in toward information which has been on record for decades."

Although the Queens Library has dedicated itself to digitally preserving documents of all of Long Island's four counties, it has focused efforts to preserve the history of Queens, dedicating hundreds of thousands of dollars to digitally archive primary as well as secondary sources of information and make it readily available at the fingertips of those willing to access it, as oppose to crowd-sourced information generated by popular Web sites such as Wikipedia.

History Personified

Borough Historian Jack Eichenbaum has set himself apart. As both student and teacher of the borough's history, he stands out in a technological age, offering city residents a more tactile experience than the internet can offer.

For more than three decades, Eichenbaum has guided thousands of participants on his historically niche and diversified walking tours, discussing many of the world's greatest moments in history which are interwoven into each of the borough's neighborhoods.

By geographically molding tours to



An inside look of the Central Library reveals the digitization process which is currently underway.

Queens' communities, viewers are not only able to experience the past first hand, but also understand history as it unfolded.

"I can talk about the Old Quaker Meeting House, but I can best talk about it in front of it," he said of the historical site where Dutch freeholders signed the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657, the precursor of what would eventually set the stage for the United States Constitution's provision on the freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights.

Over the years, Eichenbaum has seen a decline in people interested in the significance the borough holds in history, noting that the borough's younger generation of ethnically diverse residents are often unaware of the history their home holds.

As the average age of members of the Queens Historical Society continues to rise, Eichenbaum worries and wonders who will carry the torch of history to future generations. There's a lot riding on the Queens Memory Project.

"With a lot of people coming from outside the country and from all around the states that don't know about this great place, I continue to wonder who will carry all this on," Eichenbaum said reminiscing over his career as a historian. "New York City has certainly changed a lot. We'll just have to wait and see."

Reach Reporter Jason Banrey at jbanrey@queenstribune.com or (718) 357-7400, Ext. 128.



John Hyslop, Digital Assets Manager of the Queens Library shows off a state of the art flatbed scanner which will soon be used to digitize its book collection.