

## Dedication Celebrates a Living Landmark

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**Historical Society and Koyasan Temple dedicate Little Tokyo's oldest tree.**

Photos by **MarioG. Reyes/Rafu Shimpō**

**Members of the Koyasan Buddhist Temple and Bishop Taisen Miyata, right, chant during the dedication ceremony for the Aoyama Tree, Thursday morning.**



**Jack Kunitomi, 92, reminisces about his boyhood spent climbing the fig tree on what was once North Central, now JANM Plaza.**



**Huell Howser enthusiastically chats with the members of Boy Scout Troop 379, founded at Koyasan Temple in 1931, for a segment on his popular KCET show, "California's Gold."**

The Aoyama Tree, a towering 60-foot Moreton Bay Fig that has grown with the Little Tokyo community and the Koyasan Buddhist Tempel for the past 88 years, shaded the dozens of community leaders, city representatives, and temple members gathered for the dedication ceremony for the first living historic cultural monument in downtown Los Angeles on Thursday morning. The tree, the oldest living in Little Tokyo, stands at the edge of a parking lot on the campus of the Japanese American National Museum, marking the historic site of the Koyasan Daishi Mission.

Hosted by the Little Tokyo Historical Society, the reception marked the culmination of a long effort to have the tree recognized for its historic importance to the community. Deanna Matsumoto, who spearheaded the nomination of the tree as a city landmark, recognized the importance of the Koyasan Temple in preserving the tree, as well as the Historic and Cultural Neighborhood Council and the Office of Historic Resources for the City of Los Angeles for helping the Aoyama Tree attain its current status.

Koyasan Daishi Mission was founded in 1912 by Reverend Shutai Aoyama as the United States' first Koyasan Shingon Buddhist Temple. Aoyama, known in Japan as a worker's advocate, became aware of a need for spiritual development as he worked alongside manual laborers, and with this in mind, he immigrated to the United States in 1909.

His congregation steadily grew, leading him to look for a new site. The temple settled on a rundown wood frame restaurant on North Central, now the JANM Plaza. In 1920, Koyasan moved into its new home, distinguished by the 18-foot tree, then commonly known as a rubber tree, standing in front.

The site on Central served the temple for 20 years until moving into its current location on First Street in 1940. The members of the church, now known as Koyasan Beikoku Betsuin, enjoyed their new temple for less than two years before being interned at places like Crystal City. Though the temple got back on its feet after the war, the original site was razed in the early fifties, and all but the growing rubber tree was torn out for a new parking lot.

Today, that tree, well over 100 years old, still connects the temple and the community to its past. According to Koyasan Bishop Taisen Miyata, the congregation recognizes the tree as a “bodi tree,” a source of enlightenment. Ministers and parishioners from Koyasan marked the beginning of the reception with a prayer before the tree and a special chant. President of the Historic and Cultural Neighborhood Council Kim Benjamin and manager Ken Bernstein from the Office of Historic Resources, the office responsible for endowing the tree with landmark status, then addressed the sizable crowd.

“Historic preservation is about much more than preserving the bricks and mortar, preserving the buildings. It’s about preserving places, landscape features, natural features, whatever it is that makes a community a community, and this tree is really a prime example,” said Bernstein.

Closing the reception, a certificate of recognition was awarded the Little Tokyo Historical Society from the Office of City Councilwoman Jan Perry, who expressed her own wonder at the longevity of the tree.

“The fact that it is strong and has sustained and has great longevity in the midst of an asphalt desert is reflective of the values, I think, of this community, and its own strength and desire to sustain itself and to share with others.”

The dedication of the tree marks the first step in a larger plan to create an art park on the JANM Plaza, which includes the Geffen Contemporary and the Go For Broke Monument. Matsumoto has expressed her hopes that the Aoyama tree will be an integral part of a future cultural park, with a seating area and plaques for children and visitors to learn about the history of Little Tokyo and Koyasan.

If the reception was any indication of the tree’s effect, it should continue to draw visitors young and old. One 92-year-old former resident reminisced about climbing the tree as a child. Boy Scout Troop 379, originally founded at Koyasan in 1931, was just one of a number of community and youth organizations that turned out for the ceremony. Public Television personality Huell Howser attended with his cameraman and trademark enthusiasm in tow. And of course, the congregation of Koyasan Beikoku Betsuin turned out en masse to support their new landmark.

Like Reverend Aoyama’s role in founding the church, Bishop Miyata believes the Aoyama tree will serve a role in anchoring the community.

“We make an honor of our founder Aoyama. [The tree] is a symbol of the church. What Aoyama means: *ao* means blue-green and *yama* is mountain, so Aoyama tree is a suitable title for this great tree.”