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Hotel visit evokes haunting memories

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Francis Arai waited several moments before ascending the steep flight of stairs inside the historic Merchant Hotel.

It wasn't that she couldn't move as quickly as she had as a kid, when she used to dash through the hallways with her sister. Or that the interior had changed dramatically since she last set foot in the building 65 years ago.

Rather, she says with a laugh, it was because she wondered whether "that woman's ghost is still hanging around here."

From 1934 to early 1939, Arai and her family lived in the tiny rooms above what is now Old Town Pizza. The three- and four-story complex at Northwest Davis, between Second and Third, once was the heart of "Nihonmachi" or Portland's Japantown. Dozens of Japanese families called it home, along with several physicians, a weekly newspaper, two beauty shops and a bathhouse.

"Everyone we knew was Japanese," she says. "That's why when I saw that woman going through my dresser drawers one morning, it scared me, because she wasn't Japanese."

Arai, who now lives in Santa Barbara, Calif., recalls being awakened one morning by a stranger searching her room. "I had no idea what she was looking for, but I know I had never seen her before," she says. "After a while, she disappeared."

Arai, who was 6 at the time, says that for years she had been reluctant to talk about the ghost with friends and family. "I didn't want them to laugh or think that I lost my mind," she says.

Today, at least one person isn't laughing.

Jefferson Davis, who's published two books on the paranormal, says a clairvoyant recently reported seeing a woman in a black Victorian-era dress studying pizza customers from a vantage point on the second-floor mezzanine.

Owner Adam Milne confirms hearing of extrasensory sightings from customers and employees, including accounts of a phantom spirit, wafts of perfume drifting by and of a woman strolling into the basement after hours.

"People don't always talk about it openly here," he says. "Most nod their heads or shrug their shoulders when asked about her."

Legend has it that Nina -- whose name is chiseled in the brick wall -- was a prostitute in the early 1900s who had been persuaded by missionaries to reform and supply them with the names of her peers. One day, her body was found at the bottom on the old pneumatic elevator shaft.

Although no records exist to verify the story, he says, "There are far too many accounts to dismiss this one."

Davis claims Merchant is not the only Portland building with resident spirits and has written about sightings at the Heathman Hotel, John Palmer House and White Eagle Saloon.

Adding to Merchant Hotel lore is the network of underground passages that are rumored to have housed gambling and opium dens, as well as served as routes for unsuspecting young men who were plied with liquor, kidnapped and carried off to awaiting ships.

When it opened in 1885 with its distinctive cast-iron facade, the Merchant became a popular gathering spot for timber barons, ship owners and local businessmen. The area north of Burnside bustled with saloons and gambling halls. But by the end of World War I, it had been transformed into the heart of Portland's Japanese community.

That changed in early 1942, when Executive Order 9066 removed many of those of Japanese ancestry -- including Arai's family -- to internment camps in Idaho.

"After the war, my parents decided to move to California," she says. "We had lost everything. So they thought that there was no reason to move back."

Returning after six decades, the 75-year-old recently spent two hours zigzagging through remodeled offices and peering down vacant hallways.

"So much has changed," she said. "Only the doorways look the same."

As for Nina, she refused to make an appearance.

"That's OK," Arai says. "Maybe she just wants to be left alone with her memories."

As for Milne, he'll be opening a version of Old Town Pizza this fall in Vanport Plaza on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard near Northeast Alberta. He doesn't expect any supernatural tagalongs.

"I wouldn't mind if they were like Nina," he says. "She's brought us good luck."

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