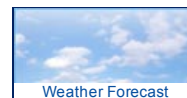




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# History is in the making

by Holly Tsang

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The McQuilling Family, circa 1927, sitting atop the stump of one of 28 trees that were cleared to make way for the first apartment building in Flushing's Waldheim neighborhood. Annalou McQuilling Christensen (now aged 92), standing behind her father, was one of the subjects interviewed for the Queens Memory Project. Photo courtesy of Annalou Christensen.

Queens prides itself on being one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the nation, but in a borough of over two million residents, individual stories often get lost in the shuffle. Queens College, in collaboration with Queens Library, has launched the Queens Memory Project in an effort to preserve borough history.

"Like Queens itself, this project is complex and dynamic. We're not doing traditional archiving of materials from the past," said Professor Benjamin Alexander, director of Special Collections and Archives at Queens College. "Instead, we want to engage the historical process of Queens in real time and create a website that captures the borough's democratic, pluralistic history."

What began as an independent study project for then-student Natalie Milbrodt is to become the first-ever digital archive of contemporary and historical records of life in the borough. For her project, Milbrodt conducted oral history interviews with 20 residents of Waldheim, an enclave less than a mile from downtown Flushing.

Among the subjects is 92-year-old Annalou Christensen (née McQuilling), whose parents purchased the lot for their home in the early 1900s from parceled farmland. She recalls neighbors renting out rooms in their mansions for extra income during the Great Depression.

Sisters Nilda and Rosa Tirado, who bought their house in the 1970s, were among the first women in the area to be given mortgages. The interview mentions their early efforts to be accepted as the first Puerto Rican family in the area.

Devotees of the largely South Indian Ganesha Temple were another focus. Interviews and photographs document an annual ritual in which temple members pull a sacred statue of the Hindu deity Ganesha through the streets of Flushing on a chariot.

A recent \$25,000 grant from the Metropolitan New York Library Council will fund the digitization of archival records and establish an interactive website of collective Queens memories.

"Support for this project will allow us to enhance public access to existing records of historical and contemporary life in Queens neighborhoods, providing a record of change in development, population, community lifestyles and identities," said Milbrodt, who is serving as project manager.

The Queens Memory Project will eventually expand beyond Flushing with a digital archive of neighborhood-specific historical and contemporary photography, maps, news clippings, oral history interviews and other documents. Users will also have the opportunity to contribute their own content as related to the communities.



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