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Historic effort

Smokestacks & Geraniums Authors attempt to fill gaps in the local record

By roger showley

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When Katherine Hon was gathering material for her history of North Park at the San Diego Historical Society's library, she often heard the frustrations voiced by younger researchers.

“Why can't I go look it up on your computer?” they'd ask a librarian, only to be told that the source material they wanted was available in books that would be unlikely ever to make their way into an easily accessed Internet archive.

In an age when researchers turn first to the Internet, those trying to uncover history at the neighborhood level must resort to traditional detective work in musty attics and library stacks. Only a few dedicated authors, whether trained as historians or not, put the time into such “micro-level” projects that promise little economic payback.

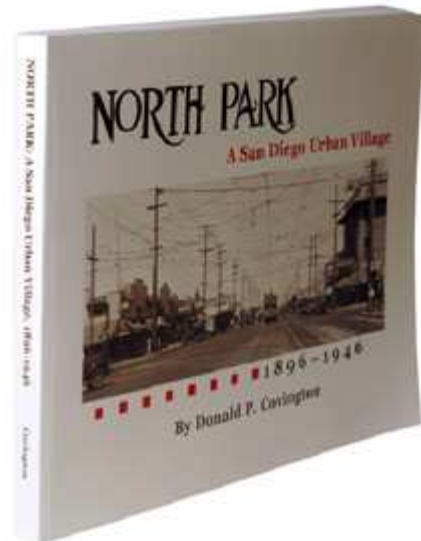
“It's got to be a passion,” Hon said. And it's a field largely ignored by professionals who focus on the broader sweep of historical events.

Ironically, Hon said there is a growing interest in the history of local communities that has been propelled by a younger generation buying homes in older neighborhoods.

One of those neighborhoods is North Park, a community of nearly 50,000 residents located north and east of Balboa Park that in recent years has undergone widespread revitalization and redevelopment.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Using her husband's research, Karon Covington (above) worked with editor Katherine Hon on a history of North Park.



“Maybe it's us baby boomers,” she added, “who are starting to look back now and really value our youth and roots.”

David Watson, executive director of the San Diego Historical Society, said he, too, detects a growing interest in local neighborhood histories.

“We see a nice, very healthy mix of lay historians and professionals,” he said.

Along with two other recently published books – a pictorial history of Fallbrook and a coffee-table-style volume on Imperial Beach – Hon's “North Park: A San Diego Urban Village, 1896-1946” illustrates the range of work being done by local authors.

Sometimes it takes a lifetime of digging to sort out the history of a community.

Fortunately for Hon, whose daytime job is writing environmental impact reports, most of her work was already completed by the late Donald P. Covington.

An art and art history professor at San Diego State University, Covington served on the North Park Community Association history committee. From 1988 until his death in 2002, he gathered the details for what he planned as an architectural history of the community's first 50 years.

Working with Covington's widow, Karon, Hon edited the material into the 254-page book, which Hon self-published several weeks ago on behalf of the association. She lives in North Park with her husband Steve, who bought their home in 1985 before they were married.

Real estate agents, community activists and others have snatched up copies at \$20 apiece, a testament to the underlying interest in North Park's origins and desire to preserve its historic sites.

“I hope it becomes a tool for awakening that in people and for encouraging that kind of attitude, because once historic resources are gone, they're just gone,” Hon said. “Then I think you do lose that connection to the past.”

Karon Covington lauded Hon's effort to complete her husband's work: “I think it's a readable book with a lot of information in it. It has a lot more than other community books I've seen.”