Nearly Neighbors
The Stephenson Family
4425 & 4423 Clement Street (32 Clark Street)
Period of Residence: 1897-1943

Native Sons of the Golden West

The Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) was established in 1875 as an effort on the part of second generation Californians to preserve the Gold Rush memories of their parents (Glassberg 2001:175–176). By the 1920s the NSGW functioned both as a heritage organization and an influential nativist political group. The linkage between preservation (i.e., heritage) and nativist politics is not coincidental. Heritage was also part of national processes and effort to “fix” an American identity that increasingly appeared to be under threat from industrialization, rampant capitalism, class tensions, and, last but not least, massive waves of immigration. A turn to historical memory served to reinforce certain concepts of national identity, and also as a tool to assimilate immigrants.

The NSGW counted some powerful and wealthy men among its membership, and the organization became politically influential. Regardless of its founders’ intentions, like similar heritage organizations of the time such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, NSGW was by the 1920s, a nativist organization—intensely nationalistic, and influential in anti-immigrant and nativist politics. The Native Sons led state and local campaigns to restrict Chinese and Japanese immigration, and played an important role in passing the Alien Land Law Acts of 1913 and 1920 (Molina 2010:181). The Grizzly Bear, the organization’s monthly publication, published frequent denunciations of Chinese and Japanese immigration such as “Indisputable facts and figures proving California will become Japanized unless yellow peril stamped out” (McClatchy 1921:121) and in a six-point credo published in 1925 proclaimed the desire of the NSGW to “preserve the historic landmarks of our state” and “to hold California for the White Race” (Glassberg 2001: 193–194).

A delegate’s badge for the 1919 “Grand Parlor” (annual meeting) of the Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW) was recovered from Pit 6. This badge indicates participation by a Stephenson family member in some of the broader efforts during the early 20th century to shape American memory and, by extension, American identity.

It is difficult to parse membership and participation in a group such as the Native Sons into attitudes. We do not know, for example, what the internal debates were within the organization. While the owner of the medallion may simply have been a Gold Rush “buff,” he certainly participated in a vociferously nativist organization that was, at the very least, concerned with marking the landscape as the preserve of a particular group—the White, native-born.