

Book Review

Temescal Legacies: Narratives of Change from a North Oakland Neighborhood, researched, written, and designed by Jeff Norman, \$18.95, soft cover, 192 pp, illustrated throughout with photographs and maps. Printed on acid-free paper. Available in local bookstores (Diesel Books or Mrs. Dalloway's, both on College Avenue) and from Shared Ground, (\$20 including shipping and tax) 477 Rich Street, Oakland CA 94609, phone (510) 653-7190, or www.sharedground.org.

Sometimes when I read a great book on Alameda County history—and *Temescal Legacies* is just that, a great book—I wish our society would develop a book awards program so that the best of the best could be honored annually. *Temescal Legacies* would be my candidate for 2006. It is beautifully and lovingly written, researched designed, beautifully printed (archival paper, fine photographs and maps), and could serve as an excellent model for history books of this genre. So what I'm saying is this: even if you don't know or live in the Temescal neighborhood, buy this book. You will be greatly moved by it.

The book is divided into five major topics, each providing a lively history of their development over the years and how each has contributed to the richness of community that is the Temescal neighborhood and indeed all of Oakland, Alameda County, and beyond.

The first is the Studio One Arts program that grew from the purchase of a former orphanage run by the Ladies Relief Society, into the successful, citywide recreation and arts program that it is today. It is, in fact, "one of Oakland's best kept secrets." The second is the "rise and fall" of the Sacramento Northern Railway—perhaps the nation's largest electric interurban railway (it stretched from Oakland to Sacramento and north to Chico from 1913 to 1957) and ran right through the heart of the Temescal residential neighborhood).

There is also the exciting story of the founding (1965) of the East Bay Negro Historical Society and its successful struggle to become a world-class mu-

seum and public library: the African American Museum and Library in the beautiful Charles Greene building on 14th Street and Martin Luther King, Jr. Way in downtown Oakland.

The saga of Temescal Creek, the longest and most historic creek in Alameda County, is beautifully told and photographed here. The creek has been chopped up, culverted, and tinkered with over the years but it has survived in battered form and the story of the neighborhood's valiant efforts to preserve it is nicely told here.

But the best and most informative topic for me was that of the Grove-Shafter Freeway which began in 1955 to smash a wide swath through the Rockridge and Temescal neighborhoods, becoming one of the great "horror stories" for the City of Oakland. At the same time the arrogant, brutal Division of Highways (Caltrans today) was building the ugly, double-decked freeway on San Francisco's waterfront (destroyed by divine intervention in the quake of '89!). Temescal is still suffering from this atrocious assault and the book shows how the Temescal community has worked to recover. This chapter is one of the finest examples of 1950s freeway abuse in the state of California.

On a personal note, I entered this battle in 1958—having just returned to California from New York—and worked with environmentalists and neighborhoods to stop the Shepherd Canyon Freeway in the Montclair district. Our point man was Assemblyman Ken Meade (his administrative assistant was Tom Bates, now Berkeley's Mayor) and we worked out a deal with Governor Reagan to drop the Shepherd Canyon leg of the freeway and send the money to Los Angeles for the La Cienega freeway. I make no apologies for this Machiavelian shifting of funds. As always, follow the money.

Treat yourself to *Temescal Legacies*. You'll be glad you did. □

—Harlan Kessel



Sacramento Northern, Shafter Avenue (looking north toward Forest). Circa 1950. Frank Suzio Collection. From *Temescal Legacies*.