

City Blocks That Disappeared: In most new housing developments, blocks are laid out, and streets, curbs, and sidewalks are built before buildings are constructed. So, it is not unusual to see empty blocks that will soon be part of a vibrant community. Three times in my life I have seen the opposite, however, empty blocks where houses once stood and the community is gone.

The first time was the most dramatic. On September 3, 1945, I flew with my weather reconnaissance crew in our B-24 over Tokyo Bay and Japan's capital city on its west shore. General MacArthur had presided over the Japanese surrender the day before that took place on the deck of the Battleship Missouri, anchored in the middle of the bay. There was no sunshine in the area on September 3; stratus clouds covered the sky at an altitude of about 2,000 feet. We had flown up from Iwo Jima, four hours away, in the morning at our normal altitude of 8,000 feet, so we were well above the cloud cover and could not see the ground. Only the snow-covered Mount Fuji, rising high above the clouds, glistened in the sunlight. Flying orders dictated that U.S. planes should not fly low over Japan, as the civilian population was still fearful of unfriendly incendiary bombing. Be that as it may, the 10 young men in our B-24 were not going to miss the chance to see something of the homeland of our recent enemy.

As we dropped below the overcast and settled on an altitude of 1,000 feet or less, what had been the city of Tokyo lay before us. Hardly a building was standing, as most of them had burned to the ground as a result of the relentless pounding from incendiary bombs dropped from American B-29s for many months. The streets were still there with their curbs and sidewalks, and a few electric trolley cars were operating, but we saw no people. There was no reason for them to be there. What once was a thriving city was gone. We flew to the front gate of the Emperor's Palace, on a knoll overlooking the burned-out city. It had not been touched by the bombing.

As we circled over the bay, we flew very low over the Battleship Missouri, still anchored where history was made the day before. Then, as we headed southwest over Tokyo suburbs and Yokohama, commuter trains seemed to be running, with many civilians standing on station platforms awaiting their trains. At the sound and sight of an American plane, most ran for cover. The Japanese population had yet to realize that the war was over.

Despite the poor weather and an impossible chance to send good weather observations by radio back to headquarters, we headed west across southern Japan, as we wanted to see Hiroshima. During the few times we could see the ground on this journey, it was apparent how orderly were the country communities in Japan. The tiny villages, probably housing 10,000 people each, were surrounded by many acres of neatly-manicured garden plots, undoubtedly the only source of income and survival for the residents. When we finally reached the skies over Hiroshima, we really didn't see much. It had been just four weeks since the first atomic bomb had been dropped there, destroying the city and most of its residents. The cloud cover was just too thick on September 3, and soon we had to change course and head southeast back toward Iwo Jima. It was after dark when we landed, after a flight of nearly 14 hours, but we had a day to remember.

In 1981, I was visiting in the Los Angeles area, and my friends drove me from their home in Pacific Palisades down the road through Santa Monica and along the coast to the Port of Los Angeles (San Pedro, Wilmington and Long Beach). The L.A. International Airport is along this road, and a tunnel is required to go under one of the runways. My friends took a short side trip to show me a city that was brand new and then destroyed, leaving its streets and most of its utilities intact. This was an area of several blocks of nice homes built between the end of one of the main runways of the airport and the Pacific coast. Before all of these new houses were occupied, the population was moved out and the homes were completely razed. Proximity to the airport was the reason. Whether it was considered too noisy or too dangerous or whether the airport wanted more surrounding property, I'm not sure, but here was a small city that ceased to exist before it was occupied.

In 1989, Ruth and I attended one of her “Stuttgart Reunions” in Minneapolis. Following that we drove north to Duluth, and one day made a trip to the Missabe Iron Range in northern Minnesota. Iron ore mining, a major industry for several generations there, was at a stand-still, and most members of the former population had been forced to find employment elsewhere. In either Virginia (MN) or Hibbing, thriving mining towns in their heyday, there were blocks of land where the buildings had been torn down. The area had been cleaned up and the streets with their curbs and sidewalks were intact. Iron ore from other countries was supplying the need for steel in this country. We did see a single front-end loader working at the bottom of a huge open-pit mine ½ mile away and visited a very nice mining museum in the neighboring town of Chisholm. Towns that were no more!

Work Report: No “official” work sessions were held, but the railroad group had two daytime work sessions to work on the double-tracked A.V.R.R. trestle. On Tuesday, December 27, seven volunteers turned out, viz: Brent McDougall, Dave Leon, Mike Leister, Mike Ciosek, Bob Koury, Robert Hopkins, and John Bacino. The walking planks were removed and some of the defective ties replaced with new cypress, ripped to size before delivery. Two-thirds of the planking was reinstalled. The weather was perfect for outdoor work.

On a cold Friday, December 30, four volunteers were on hand to finish up. They were: Mike Ciosek, Bob Koury, Dave Leon, and Mark Bodestab. They would have finished the new planking but ran out of screws. One of these dedicated fellows said he would finish the job on New Year’s Day. Mark used the break in trestle work to remove a portion of the plywood ceiling in the shop, badly water-damaged, in preparation for repair and better insulation as a part of the shop repainting project.

Our longtime volunteer Emil Christofano had a physical last week that sent him to St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington for further examination. A pacemaker was inserted on Thursday, and he returned to his apartment at Cokesbury Village on Friday. He is doing well. Our very best wishes are extended to Emil and Doris in the year ahead. Emil says it is no longer a New Year but is already used.

Our Work Sessions will resume tomorrow night, Tuesday, January 3. In addition to car-related and railroad projects, a priority will be the upgrading and painting of our shop, under the supervision of Mark Bodestab.