

An Overview of the Plaques Donated by the Native Sons of the Golden West ; What they represent, why they should be removed, and how they hurt our community

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To be able to go to school and to have it as a safe space for you, it is a privilege that most overlook. We take for granted the little things that we have, but sometimes those little things are so much bigger for another. Sometimes the things we take for granted are the same things that others are trying so hard to attain.

It has recently been brought to the attention of many at this campus that the plaques in the front entrance of West County High School and the entrance of the big gym were donated by a white supremacist and nationalist group. The Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW), the group that had donated the plaques to the school, is a group that works towards preserving the history of California. They are quoted to have said that “California was given by God to a white people, and with God’s strength we want to keep it as He gave it to us.” What this means is that during their history, the group perceived preserving the history of California as keeping it as a state for “a white people,” excluding all ethnic minorities, most evidently Japanese Americans.

The Native Sons of the Golden West did an excellent job of preserving the state for “a white people” by playing a leading role in California’s anti-Japanese activism during the prewar decades. They were a group that approved a resolution to exclude all “orientals” from California. For them, they were simply taking on the white man’s burden, the idea that white men were the ones responsible for “liberating, educating, and civilizing” indigenous people. For Japanese Americans and other ethnic minorities, it was outright hate and discrimination.

Even when the Immigration Act of 1924 was enacted, an act that prohibited emigration from Asia and set a limit to the number of Asian immigrants in the United States, NSGW continued their anti-Japanese activism. During WWII, Japanese Americans faced an onslaught of inaccurate information being spread about them from NSGW to further push them into isolation and exclusion. The information spread had the intent of inciting more fear from Americans and continuing to stigmatize Japanese Americans even more. In addition, NSGW led efforts during the 1940s to remove Japanese Americans’ citizenship statuses, though these efforts were unsuccessful. They continued in their efforts to limit Japanese Americans’ role in society and community rights as a whole.

Both of the plaques at the school read:

THIS BUILDING DEDICATED TO

TRUTH~LIBERTY

~TOLERATION~

BY THE

NATIVE SONS OF THE GOLDEN WEST

The plaque at the front entrance of the school was donated on December 5th, 1935 and the plaque at the entrance of the big gym was donated on December 12th, 1954. At first glance, it may seem that the plaques promote ideals that are beneficial for the campus, however taking into account their history at the time of the plaques’ installation, are these ideals truly the ones that we honor today? What truth did they want us to honor? And was it one that aligned with the group’s goal of preserving the history of California for “a white people”? When they say toleration, what exactly did they mean? Toleration of a specific ethnic group? As in tolerating that ethnic group as they worked towards removing their citizenship status? If these were truly the ideals that went into the installation of these plaques, how can we ignore them when it directly rejects and discriminates against students and staff at this campus?

While people hold the argument that the group has changed from their racist past and that we can’t place 21st century ideals on things from the past, that doesn’t mean that these plaques stop hurting people. Yes, groups can change. We have seen that with highly honorable groups today such as the

American Red Cross who in the 1970s had prohibited men who had sex with men from donating blood, Margaret Sanger who created Planned Parenthood on the basis of eugenics, or Henry Ford and his anti-Semitic views. We know that groups can change their ideals and beliefs, we have seen that happen. However, the Native Sons of the Golden West have never specifically apologized for their racist actions, neither have they offered reparations. In addition, when viewing photos of their group membership, there is a majority of white members. If they had truly apologized for their actions, why is there a lack of diversity within their members? Has the group truly moved on from their racist past?

The plaques given by the Native Sons of the Golden West that are cemented in the front of this school and big gym serve as a form of reminder of these actions and it hurts being reminded everyday of that discrimination. I will not lie, it's hard being an Asian American on this campus. As a group, we're such a small minority; there's a lack of resources, a lack of opportunities, a lack of connections, and like all minorities, we're simply trapped. These plaques, seeing them and knowing their history, it feels oppressive seeing them every morning as I enter the main building. If the group that donated these very plaques were openly racist towards Asian Americans, then, as an Asian American, how can I begin to feel welcome at this school?

How can I feel welcome walking the hallways of a building that honors a white supremacist group that specifically targeted my ethnicity? How can I feel welcome going to school and knowing that the plaques, with their history, remain? How can I feel welcome when there is a permanent, cemented plaque that represents outright discrimination? How can I feel welcome on this campus as an ethnic minority?

To simply say to ignore them, to remain ignorant of their history, to say that there are bigger issues on campus than getting rid of the plaques, to say that it doesn't matter, that hurts. At the very least, the plaques and their racist history should be addressed. At the very least, ethnic minorities on campus should be respected. At the very least, people should know and be aware. Maybe removing the plaques is not enough to change the racism on this campus or change the school culture. However, it is a step, and we should at least try. Because the racism on this campus cannot continue to be ignored, it cannot continue to be brushed aside as it has been, it cannot continue.

The racism on this campus has affected all ethnic minorities. For me personally, at the very beginning of this school year, I met a student who was talking about getting haircuts from a Chinese hairdresser. They decided it'd be funny to talk in a fake Chinese accent, to fully detail their story about the hairdresser who messed up their haircut. What I remember is the sound of their fake broken English, high pitched voice, their jeering tone, their mockery. Stories like these, they remain ignored. How can you tell me to ignore it and that it'll simply go away? How can you tell me to ignore it when I can still remember the way they sounded with their fake Chinese accent? How can you tell me to ignore the

plaques when the discrimination by the Native Sons of the Golden West still haunts this campus?

We like to think that our community is not built on these foundations, and we like to choose to be ignorant of uncomfortable issues. However, we cannot continue to remain blind to these injustices or this outright discrimination. For many, there is no option of simply remaining blind, there is no option of just ignoring it. Even right here in Sebastopol, we have seen anti-Japanese sentiments with the attempted burning of the Enmanji Buddhist Temple. We have seen the discrimination right here in our very own community. You cannot bury the past and you cannot simply ignore it. It is through acknowledging our history, our flawed beginnings, our foundations of discrimination, that we'll be able to move forward. Only by learning about our history and interacting with it will we be able to take the next step towards a brighter future for everyone.

I implore you, not as a writer to their audience, but as an Asian American on this campus, to please acknowledge the history of these plaques, to acknowledge their racist past. I implore you to take a look at the racist actions in our community and our campus, and make an effort to put a stop to them. I implore you to push for the removal of these plaques. I implore you to respect the ethnic minorities on this campus. Most of all, I implore you to help make West County High School a safe space for all.