

Sharing memories of Fort Street, Honolulu's old retail hub

By Bob Sigall, Special to the Star-Advertiser
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In December I wrote about the fort that was built on the Honolulu waterfront 200 years ago. I also wrote about Fort Street and its stores. Fort Street was Honolulu's main shopping district until Ala Moana Center opened in 1959.



STAR-ADVERTISER FILE : The Ritz department store on Fort Street in the 1950s.

Before the Pali Highway was built, Fort Street extended from Aloha Tower to Pacific Heights.

Several readers wrote me about their favorite Fort Street memories.

"I lived in the downtown area for many years and it was such a blessing having Fort Street right in my own backyard," wrote Rae Alice Hall. "It was so convenient.

"All of my daughters got their Hawaiian bracelets at Ming's and I got my mother-of-the-bride dress at Ritz. Between Liberty House and Kress (about two blocks distant), you could buy just about anything you could ever need.

"It was such a treat to go shopping on a bright, sunny day. I have many fond memories of those days gone by. When we moved away years later, I really missed it all."

Lorene Ono remembers going downtown with her mother-in-law, Peggy Nakajo Ono, who worked at Bon Ton Dress Shop.

“Woolworth had a wonderful delicatessen. I loved their namasu. I also loved their huge fabric department. On Union Mall was George’s Delicatessen where I’d buy a dozen cone sushi to take home.

“In the late 1950s, I had my first hamburger deluxe and root beer float at the New Eagle Cafe downtown (Chaplain Lane off Fort Street).

“I miss those old places and a simpler time.”

Warren K.H. Wong said his family home was at 1907 Fort St., “Honolulu, T.H. (Territory of Hawaii).”

“We shopped at Liberty House, Kress, Kramer’s, McInerney, Andrade and a few other places. Kress was a 5 & 10 cent store and had multiple entrances on the front and back. Kress had a soda fountain where one could get a banana split for 20 cents, and that’s where I bought marbles in a net bag for 10 cents, plus a spinning top and Duncan yo-yo.

“The Princess Theater was located on Fort Street, mauka of Beretania Street. Nip’s Potato Chip Factory was between School and Vineyard streets.

“There were many mom and pop stores on Fort Street mauka of Vineyard up to Pauoa Road where you could get shave ice with ice cream or azuki beans for 10 cents and sushi and plate lunches.”

Luane Fong Lau told me her family rented a two-bedroom cottage on Fort Street across from Nip’s Potato Chips.

“A special treat for me was Kress’ spaghetti lunch at their counter, sitting on the mounted seat that swirled around with our legs dangling down, or their ice cream sandwich from a corner counter on the side.

“I don’t remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor but my mom tells me on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, she was nine months pregnant with my brother, Melvin. I was 2 1/2 years old and I kept asking my mom what the noise was outside and kept on pulling her hand to go outside to our porch.

“My mom was sitting on a chair in our living room and finally got up for me,” Lau said.

“After we left the living room, shrapnel came through our house and the chair she was sitting in. She thanked me for years for saving her and my unborn brother’s life.

“Mom gave birth four days after Pearl Harbor, so my brother Melvin’s Chinese name was Hing for strength. My sister Karen was born on Sept. 9, shortly after Armistice Day, so her Chinese name was Ping for peace.

“We moved when my parents bought a house in Kaimuki in 1947. After living in ‘the city’ — and before there were freeways — Kaimuki was so far away.”

“It was Christmas of 1956,” Alvin Yee told me. “I was 4 years old growing up on Hall Street in a neighborhood affectionately called ‘Hall’s Half Acre,’ or something like that, in Honolulu’s slum district near Aala Park.” Kukui Gardens occupies that area today.

“One evening, our family had an early dinner and Daddy had us three boys put on nice clothes — leather shoes, khaki pants, and Mommy-made aloha shirts. We had to dress up to go to downtown in those days.

“We walked a few blocks until we reached Fort Street. That was the first time I had been to downtown at night. We walked past the brightly lit window displays and maneuvered through the crowds while holding Daddy’s hand.

“I especially remember the Christmas decorations strung over the street,” Yee said, “with images of candy canes and swinging bells. We walked through fancy stores like Liberty House and Kress, buying nothing, as we had grown up poor and asked for nothing.”

They reached the Thrifty drug store at the mauka corner of Pauahi Street, where his father stopped and bought ice cream cones for all of them. “I had a single scoop while my two older brothers had double scoops.

“Afterward, we started walking home along Beretania Street, crossing over the Nuuanu Stream, past a darkened Aala Park, and toward Hall Street.

“That’s when I got tired and Daddy picked me up and carried me the rest of the way. I remember my arms wrapped around his neck and breathing in his aftershave.

“We walked down the quiet street, past the two-story wooden tenement buildings with their sewer pipes mounted on the outside. We reached our address and turned down the sidewalk to our apartment. Ah, home!”

Downtown is darker now, Yee said, with all the big stores gone to Ala Moana. His father saved up from his job at Trader Vic’s to buy a house in Makiki.

“The slum district is gone now, and so is my daddy. I’m 64 years old and my two older brothers became a lawyer and a surgeon. But I still remember the simple pleasure of window-shopping with my daddy on Fort Street.”