

Jan Jarboe Russell: Return to glory?

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The Japanese Tea Gardens used to be the kind of place that made San Antonio *feel* like San Antonio, a city not isolated from other cultures but so irresistible that the world beat a path to our door.

In 1934, when the garden was in its heyday, a guidebook to San Antonio described the pagoda where a Japanese family — the Jingus — lived and served tea to visitors as "a palm-thatched pavilion that offers a place of rest where light lunches and teas are served by Japanese attendants."

In addition to rest, tourists seated on what felt like a floating terrace had a view of lily ponds stocked with brilliant-colored koi, arched bridges, winding paths and a spectacular waterfall.

Today, it is difficult to exaggerate the degree to which the 87-year-old garden has deteriorated. The southern rim of the decaying pagoda is held up by 2-by-4's. The ponds stand empty of water. The koi are gone. The waterfall no longer exists.

If the garden once symbolized San Antonio's splendor, today it symbolizes the opposite — lost glory.

"I've never seen a more frustrating thing," said David Strauss, owner of the Barn Door Restaurant, who helped revitalize the River Walk in the 1970s by opening the Stockman Restaurant. "If the River Walk were in the same bad shape as the garden, the town would be up in arms. We've just done a miserable job of managing one of San Antonio's biggest assets."

In the past 40 years, public money for maintenance of the garden has literally dried up. The ponds were drained of water a year ago because the city couldn't afford \$60,000 a year to fill them.

As the city has grown, new parks have been added, but the city budget for maintaining the public spaces has been consistently cut.

In January, the city threw in the towel at the Japanese Tea Gardens and the Sunken Garden Theater. Rather than improving and maintaining these public facilities, the City Council solicited proposals from private companies.

But the city's price tag of \$2.5 million was so high that no private companies bid.

Fortunately, two powerful women, former Mayor Lila Cockrell and former City Councilwoman Bonnie Conner, have come forward with a plan to rescue the Japanese Tea Gardens.

Conner is president of Friends of the Park, an organization created by the San Antonio Parks Foundation, which is headed by Cockrell. The parks department recently gave Friends of the Park permission to raise private money to fund a master plan for the tea garden and oversee the restoration of the site. The effort was launched last week.

"This place must be restored," said Cockrell. "It's too big a part of the heart of San Antonio to lose it."

Under the plan, the city will use \$750,000 that voters approved in 1994 to restore and stabilize the pagoda and repair and refill the leaky stone ponds. Conner's organization will raise additional money from individuals and companies for a master plan, expected to cost \$75,000, and other improvements. The group will also take responsibility for executing the plan.

"We're committed to not only bringing back the Japanese Tea Garden, but to create a stream of revenue so that it never gets in this kind of shape again," Conner said.

A few years ago, Bob Carlson, senior vice president of Broadway Bank, raised money for a \$1 million endowment fund for the maintenance of the Arneson River Theater. He will now do the same for the tea garden.

"There's a lot of interest in an endowment for the tea garden," Carlson said. "I think we can do for the tea garden what we did for the Arneson. It's a shame the city does not keep up its property, but they don't. These treasures must be permanently maintained."

Rosemary Kowalski, president of the Japan-America Society of San Antonio, said the 150 members of that group will also raise money for the garden.

At 81, Strauss said he'd all but given up hope on restoring the tea garden until Cockrell, who is 80, told him it was time to try again. He's back on the team.

Strauss made three failed attempts — one in 1963, another in the mid-1970s and the third in 1992 — to convince the city to build an upscale restaurant along the edge of the garden to bring tourists to the area and revenue to the city.

"I had approval all three times from the City Council," said Strauss. "But nothing happened. What I proposed in 1963 would work today. You need to have a place for people to come and sit and have a good meal and enjoy the garden, just like they enjoy the River Walk."

This is not the first time the tea garden has been reinvented. The site was originally a quarry. In 1840, German masons took limestone from the quarry and used it to build

some of San Antonio's best-known buildings, including the Menger Hotel. Forty years later, Alamo Cement Co. leased the quarry from the city.

Tourists were attracted to the site in the early 1900s when Mexican American employees of the cement company set up shops and restaurants in a pavilion built by prison labor.

In 1917, Parks Commissioner Ray Lambert suggested a serene Japanese flower garden in the site. Although there were no funds for the garden (some things never change), Lambert raised money from individuals and companies and brought flowers from Japan for the garden, which opened in 1919.

He hired a Japanese couple — Kimi Eizo Jingu and his wife, Miyoshi — to tend the garden. At the city's invitation, the Jingu family moved into what is now the pagoda. In 1926, they opened the Bamboo Room, which became famous for its tea. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the city bowed to anti-Japanese sentiment and evicted the Jingu family.

The site was renamed the Chinese Sunken Gardens. A Chinese American family, Ted and Ester Wu, opened a snack bar in the pagoda until the early 1960s. In 1984, the garden was rededicated as the Japanese Tea Gardens in a ceremony attended by the Jingu family.

"So many cultures have contributed to the history of the garden," said Cockrell. "It represents the beauty and diversity of our city. I want another generation to see the koi fish in those ponds and take pictures of their children near the waterfall. It's too great a prize to lose."