

Not My Fault: Farewell to McKinley The touchy business of symbols

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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In the wee hours of last Thursday morning, the statue of 25th US President William McKinley was removed from the Arcata Plaza. His absence is jarringly noticeable to anyone who spends much time in Arcata. He stood his ground in the center of the plaza for more than 112 years.

In his time, McKinley was a popular president. He had won reelection in 1900 with 54% of the vote, a much stronger showing than his first election. Most of us don't know much about his presidency, expect perhaps the assassination six months into his second term. The name of my town was one of the results of the national outpouring of grief following his death. The three small communities of Minor, Dows Prairie and Calville were renamed McKinleyville only months afterwards, joining at least 16 towns in the nation to be given some variation of his name.

One of the people profoundly affected was George Zehndner, a prominent Arcata businessman. He had met McKinley a few months before the assassination and was a big fan. To memorialize his fallen hero and give a gift to the city, he commissioned the statue in 1905. It was installed on the fourth of July 1906 with much fanfare, joining similar monuments in at least 12 other states.

I can guess the national mood of that time. I was a senior in high school when John F Kennedy was killed and have a visceral memory of where I was and my sense of shock, fear and sadness. And like the aftermath of McKinley's death, Kennedy's assassination spawned numerous namings and monuments. For me, mention of the Kennedy name and legacy will always be entwined in the tragedy of his death.

Time changes things. As generations came and went, the memory of the McKinley assassination faded. When I was on campus, I often gave tours of the Geology Department to schoolchildren. We have a poster that features the McKinley statue in our 1906 earthquake exhibit. The kids immediately recognized the statue, but few knew who he was, that he had been a president or had been killed while in office.

Why is the McKinley statue in an earthquake exhibit? The Haig Patigian bronze was cast in San Francisco and completed in April 1906. Only days before its scheduled shipping date to Arcata, the great San Francisco earthquake occurred. The statue was one of the few things to survive the deadly combination of earthquake and inferno in the Market Street district near the waterfront.

For me the statue was a symbol of earthquake resilience and I often thought about the 1906 earthquake when I looked at his out stretched hand. I imagined him lying on Market Street where people in the neighborhood had laid him after the shaking had subsided, covered with ash. But for others, the statue became a symbol of different things – of American interventionism, imperialism and Manifest Destiny – and his presence was painful.

I know something about symbols that inflict pain. My photograph of the Disaster Prevention Center in the town of Minamisanriku has been reproduced on several technical reports and articles. I took the photo on May 6, 2011 as part of a post tsunami survey team assessing the hardest hit areas of Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures. The three-story steel-framed building was where emergency personnel assembled on March 11 to manage what was thought to be primarily an earthquake emergency. It was a designated evacuation site, strongly built and considered safe behind the town's seawall.

The 2011 tsunami overtopped the seawall and devastated the town. 130 people worked in the building. One of those was Miki Endo who continued to broadcast tsunami warnings as the building was engulfed. Her body was found a few days before I visited the town. 53 people made it onto the roof and ten managed to survive by hanging on to the antennae and equipment projecting above the structure.

The Disaster Prevention Center was an eerie place when I first saw it. Just a skeleton remained with shreds of wiring and insulation creating eerie sounds while banging in the wind. I saw the building again on the one-year remembrance of the tsunami and again in 2013 shortly after the return of the small boat Kamome. That visit was serendipity. I was driving with Amya Miller who was to become my co-author on the Kamome book project and we found ourselves in Minamisanriku during a farewell ceremony for the building. The town was about to demolish the structure as it was such a painful reminder of all they had lost in the tsunami. They placed remembrances of the people who had died.

Only it was not to be. Only hours before the bulldozers were set to arrive, the Miyagi prefectural government took ownership of the structure, and will wait until at least 2031 before letting future generations decide what to do next. They explained that the building had historic significance and that it took twenty years before a final decision was made on preserving the Atomic Bomb Dome at Hiroshima.

Symbols are complicated. For the townspeople in Minamisanriku, it has made recovery more difficult. The structure is centrally located and impossible not to see. Although I understand the historic argument, in this case my sentiments are with the people of the town. When a symbol brings grief and pain for a large segment of the people living with it, it is time to go.

So farewell Bill. I will miss you festooned in Triton's clothing for the Clam Festival and other outfits. Your absence is now a symbol too and symbols are complicated.

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