

LEARNING 'WHAT MADE AMERICA'

Hands-on history

Immigrant heritage: Event brings experiences home



KARL MONDON/STAFF PHOTOS

Brenda Wong reads a story Sunday to Cub Scout Troop 349 inside the Chinese-American Museum at Kelley Park in San Jose. The park co-hosted a one-day event focusing on the variety of U.S. immigration experiences.

By Joe Rodriguez

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SAN JOSE — Ryan and Aidan Last, two Cub Scouts on a mission, stared at two large baskets made from reeds and wondered how refugee Vietnamese “boat people” could float on the crude crafts across the Gulf of Thailand decades ago and survive the ordeal.

“One of these baskets could fit six people,” Alida Bray, head of History San Jose, told the Scouts on their visit Sunday to the city’s Kelley Park. “Can you imagine being out in the open in this?”

The boys shook their heads and said, “No!”

The Scouts spent a breezy, sunny day en-

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Aidan Last, 9, and his brother Ryan, 10, learn Sunday about Vietnamese immigration from Alida Bray of History San Jose.

Immigrant

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joying “Hands-On History: The Immigrant Experience,” a one-day event sponsored by Silicon Valley Reads, an annual community program that selects books and offers free events to engage the public in reading and discussing contemporary topics.

Karl Schmidt led another group of Scouts from west San Jose who were looking to satisfy the

history requirements necessary for earning a Scout badge.

“They need to learn what made America,” Schmidt said. “Immigration, in my opinion, is one of those things.”

The group had just left the Ng Shing Gung exhibit inside a replica of a Chinese-American temple that once stood near downtown San Jose. Standing in front of a magnificent altar, Brenda Wong, a fourth-generation Chinese-American, told young and adult visitors about the vibrant

but tragic history of San Jose’s five Chinatowns, none of which survived the anti-Asian hysteria of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Turning to a more peaceful and optimistic story, she read from a children’s book, “Hannah is My Name,” a book by Belle Yang about a young Taiwanese girl’s resettlement in the United States.

“We’re like native Californians” by now, said Wong, who is president of the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project, a nonprofit organization that

runs the exhibit.

Several historical organizations like hers occupy historic homes and buildings owned by the city and managed by the nonprofit History San Jose.

“The gist of this park is that each group tells its own story,” Bray said.

Other exhibits cover Greek and Portuguese immigration and a history of professional baseball’s Negro leagues. For more information on the reading program and historical park go to www.siliconvalleyreads.org and www.historysanjose.org.