

Opinion: My Pasadena homie, Obama

By Joe Mathews

I recently learned that, in the second grade, I was part of presidential history.

Every morning during the 1980-81 school year, I walked the five blocks between my family's home in Pasadena and Allendale Elementary School. In the evening, I went back to play Little League at Allendale Park, adjacent to school.



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The round trip seemed unremarkable then. But last month, the city installed a plaque on the sidewalk outside one of the apartment buildings I used to pass on my way to school. The plaque at 253 Glenarm St. explains that an Occidental College sophomore lived there in 1980 and 1981.

The occupant's name was Barack Obama.

This revelation—that the president of the United States was once my neighbor—might seem trivial. But it has made the California news and inspired my own state senator, Anthony Portantino, to propose renaming a portion of the 134 Freeway, connecting Pasadena with Glendale, the “President Barack H. Obama Freeway.”

I still live less than two miles from the sidewalk plaque, and

coach my kids in the same nearby Little League. So, while I'm not a big fan of the president, over the holidays I stopped a half dozen times to see the plaque. The draw is some combination of childhood nostalgia and the deliciously incongruous updating of the president-from-a-log-cabin story. Plus, I'm never alone—there always seem to be other curious locals in front of the otherwise forgettable apartment building.

But I must confess I also find the plaque—and my own interest in it—embarrassing, in an “Aren't we behaving like small-town hicks?” sort of way. And I felt that embarrassment even before my in-laws, visiting from Chicago, made fun of the plaque when I took them to see it.

Obama, after all, left us as fast as he could, transferring from Occidental to Columbia University in New York City after that sophomore year. And the plaque is the product of a conversation between Obama and a city councilman in which the president said he'd loved Pasadena—but could only remember that the street he'd lived on started with a G. (A search of phone directories and utility records identified the address, according to the Pasadena Star-News).

So why is my hometown holding so tightly to such a thin connection to a president? There's our strong commitment to celebrating African-American history in a city with one of California's oldest African-American communities. More broadly, it's understandable that Californians are clinging to a president for whom we voted twice, particularly at a time when we're confronting a president-elect that most of us see as a threat to the republic.

But that doesn't justify our state's lack of caution in celebrating Obama so robustly, even before he leaves office. There are already two schools named for Obama in Los Angeles, and another in Oakland; more are likely on the way. The town of Seaside, near Monterey, gave its Broadway Avenue a second

name—Obama Way—six years ago. And scientific researchers even named a lichen they discovered in the Channel Islands after the president. (It's called *Caloplaca obamae*).

Such celebrations seem excessive because the president hasn't exactly reciprocated our affection. During his presidency, Obama came to our state mostly to raise money and play golf. He attacked Silicon Valley for not collaborating with his administration on mass surveillance of questionable legality. He turned down our recession-era requests for financial assistance that would have prevented the worst of the state budget cuts. And he deported an awful lot of our undocumented neighbors.

At the very least, high honors for this president are premature. It's always dangerous to name things after living people, and he is just 55 years old, with—potentially—decades to screw up his reputation here. Depending on what his successor does, Obama's legacy may soon seem rather ephemeral.

So why not hold off on renaming more schools or roads for him?

Yes, the stretch of the 134 Freeway in question is near Obama's alma mater. But that's too big an honor for a guy who spent such little time here in his youth. It'd be more appropriate to name that bit of freeway for Mildred Pierce, the title character of the novel and 1945 film noir, whose daughter, a bratty social climber, dreams of leaving drab Glendale for higher social status in Pasadena.

But I feel differently about the sidewalk plaque in my old neighborhood. Yes, the plaque—or, as some of us now call it, the Obama Monument—is hokey. And yes, if you have friends from Pasadena, you may hear us bragging that Obama was once our homie.

But I say we swallow our pride and keep the plaque (and maybe have T-shirts made). It's a sweet little reminder that sometimes history is hiding just around the corner, and living

in a really shabby apartment.

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