

**San Jose's Japantown:
The People and History Behind it**

An Essay

Presented to

**The California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County**

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Introduction

San Jose's Japantown is a community rich with history and culture. The first Japanese to arrive in San Jose in the late 1800s to early 1900s established themselves and became quite successful. Today the Japanese have prospered in politics, medicine, law and several other areas. The community embodies the troubles and the hardships the Issei (first generation Japanese) endured, the reestablishment that the Nisei (second generation Japanese) went through, and the current community that the Sansei (third generation Japanese) are enjoying. Japantown has faced several changes since it was first established. It has gone from a community of a few buildings, to a bustling economic hub, and finally to a laid-back community. There are several uniquely designed buildings and the community itself is unique from the rest of the city. It has endured the hardships of getting started, racial discrimination, World War II, and vandalism but has still been able to remain standing because there are so many people that support the community. Today it stands as a place that reflects many aspects of daily life and each building has some sort of history behind it.

In the Beginning

The Japanese were not the first Asians to settle in the Santa Clara Valley. The first were the Chinese who had come to build railroads and farms. It also turned out that the Chinese had their own town located at Sixth and Taylor Streets that included grocery stores, restaurants, gambling parlors, and houses of prostitution. The City of San Jose had always seen Chinatown as a source of trouble and it was eventually demolished in 1949. However, Chinatown was owned by a kind philanthropist, John Heinlen who lent his land to building a new Chinatown and leased it to the Chinese at a low rate.¹ Although there was a lot of opposition to his actions, he continued to build the community. He was very considerate of his tenants and every year on New Year's Day, every tenant would receive a cake.² Heinlen also owned part of Japantown, which coalesced at Fifth and Jackson Streets, adjacent to Chinatown. The Japanese felt most comfortable in the area because the Chinese were there already and there were few restrictions in the area.

Establishing Nihonmachi(Japantown)

Immigration to the West Coast from Japan occurred mostly between 1890-1940. Many of the immigrants were from Hiroshima, Kumamoto, Shimane, Wakayama, and Fukuoka. The bulk of the newcomers looked for work as migrant workers in the fruit orchards. The majority of the population were men and their lives were quite harsh. Most of them had left their families and friends back at home, and most lived in boarding houses which were bunkhouses of the cheapest sort. The Issei (first generation Japanese), had chosen to settle next to Chinatown because field bosses recruiting cheap labor to work the fields came to the district and there were few places that the Japanese could safely live due to discrimination.

By 1902, a small Nihonmachi had been established with the intent to combine comradeship and resources to survive as immigrants. There were 200 permanent residents along with 3,000 seasonal workers that swelled the location during Spring and Summer.³ As the number of Chinese workers dwindled, growers began to rely more and more on the Japanese. Between 1910-1920, the Nikkei farm communities contributed significantly to the valley's agricultural production with many farmers working as sharecroppers or tenants on the orchards.

Nihonmachi consisted of a few wood frame buildings that were comprised mainly of boarding houses, pool halls, gambling parlors, and prostitution houses. The services provided catered mainly to the prevalent bachelor society. Eventually when women started immigrating into the community in 1907, grocery and clothing stores appeared.⁴ Housing in Japantown wasn't exactly ideal . Some Japanese lived in Chinatown rooms, some in the back or upstairs of

businesses, while others lived a few miles away on farms and only came to town to visit and shop. The children living on the farms would go to "country schools" but would go to town to attend Japanese language school.

To aid the immigrants there was Nihonjinkai (Japanese Association) and other social organizations that provided a variety of services for the community. They acted as a liaison with the police, helped to find translators, gave legal counsel, dealt with visas and licensing problems and sponsored picnics. Traveling back and forth to Japan was very expensive and few could afford it so most separated family members opted to write letters. With this long distance communication, "picture brides" also became a sort of long distance relationship that began to be practiced more and more. The "picture bride" practice was an arranged marriage after an exchange of pictures.

Relations between the Chinese and Japanese

In the 1890s Tuck Wo was one of the first stores to extend credit to the Japanese. The shop made the newcomers feel welcomed; they also had a sort of catering service that delivered to the Japanese workers out on the field. The relationship between Japanese and Chinese was cordial but they had little to do with one another socially. In fact, the Chinese thought that sumo wrestling was rather inappropriate because there was a lack of clothing. Except for the fact that a few Japanese lived in Chinatown, few Japanese ever ventured to their place.^s However, they did go to the butcher shop and on occasion to a banquet at the Ken Ying Low or the smaller Canton restaurant that were both located on 6th Street. Also out of curiosity, the Japanese would sometimes visit the Ng Shing Gung (a Chinese temple) located on Sixth and Taylor Street during Chinese New Years. Fortunately, the Ng Shing Gung temple was spared from the demolition that the rest of Chinatown eventually faced. By the early 1900s, Japantown already had its own barber shop and dry goods stores.

Discrimination

The Japanese did not have an easy time living in the valley. They were constantly at the mercy of discrimination and were blamed for many things. As with other Asians during the early part of the 19th century, they were treated badly, did not receive equal treatment under the law and found it hard to get citizenship. There were several immigration laws to combat the increasing Japanese population. For instance, there was the Immigration Law of 1922 that ruled if a woman married a man "ineligible for citizenship", an Asian, she would lose her citizenship. Additionally, there were several alien land laws that forbade "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from buying land. Many white politicians advocated the laws, most notably Senator John D. Phelan and Representative Everis A. Hayes. In fact, Hayes publicly declared at the San Jose Rotary Club:

These yellow peoples... have nothing in common with the people of this country... Should they be free to come to the Pacific shores without restrictions numerically, it would only be a few years when the Americanism now in California would be completely submerged and Japanese ideals and practices would dominate the entire state. Let these people acquire vast tracts of land, which they are doing in spite of the Alien Land Law, and ambitious white Americans will be driven from their land.⁶

However, to circumvent the law, some Japanese aliens with children born in the United States bought property in their children's name. To many Japanese, the alien land laws functioned to create Japanese dependency. A Japanese San Jose businessman, I.K. Ishimatsu recalled:

I don't go so far as to say the alien land laws threatened our livelihood. But if you wanted to lease or own the land for any purpose, you had to use your children's name and if you didn't have your own children, you would have to take a risk and ask somebody who was a citizen and hope everything worked out. A set of books had to be kept up for inspection by the state authorities in order to prove that you were an employee working for wage. This caused an uneasy feeling because I was informed at the time that the punishment for alien land law violation was condemnation of all the subject's property and imprisonment.⁷

The Japanese inherited the phobia against "Yellow Peril", yellow meaning people of Asian descent because there was a large immigration to the West Coast occurring between 1890-1910. There were heated political debates that rose throughout the Pacific Coast over how to deal with a new influx of Asians. The euphemistic phrase "ineligible for citizenship" that was used on the Chinese was now also used against the Japanese. Many non-Asians thought that the Japanese did not belong in the valley and would have been glad if they had left.

John D. Phelan sided with getting rid of the Japanese. He was a three time mayor of San Francisco and a United States senator, he stressed strict alien land laws as the Japanese possessed "an innate and deep-rooted desire to become land owners."⁸ In 1919, He stated that the Japanese must be "eliminated entirely like a swarm of locusts."⁹ He urged the cancellation of the Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, and tagged the Japanese as the "Huns of the East", by saying:

The Huns of the East have come. Already they have spread Over California and are stripping the state of its Americanism... Some day the Mexican and Japanese problem will come to smite us with united force.¹⁰

The San Jose Mercury was also very racist towards the Japanese along with other Asians. They did not refrain from using such terms as "Chinks" or "Japs". In fact, in an editorial on January 14, 1920, the newspaper wrote:

.... In a very short time the state may be overrun by the peoples of the yellow race; and, as in the case in the Hawaiian Islands, the white population will be in the humiliating position of having a limited authority both in the direction of industries and agricultural matters.¹¹

The Japanese felt totally isolated and the discrimination was one of the causes of Nihonmachi's detachment from other nearby communities. Consequently, the only times that the Japanese ventured out of Nihonmachi was when they were vending their wares or groceries.

Kuwabara Hospital and Hori's Building

Kuwabara Hospital was built in 1910 at 565 N. Fifth Street. The building was constructed by the Nishiura brothers and was built to entice its first resident doctor, Dr. Taishke Kuwabara, after whom the hospital was eventually named. The Hospital provided a solace to the Japanese people of the community. Japanese patients had language, religious, communication, and trust problems with local San Jose doctors. Dr. Kuwabara was not licensed in California. Kuwabara and those who later replaced him had to be supervised by a local doctor. Dr. James Beattie was the doctor that supervised all of the Japanese physicians at Kuwabara Hospital. He handled most medical cases and some minor injuries; he also held the title to the hospital.¹²

However, when the first Japanese doctor graduated from Stanford and received his license, there was a gradual disuse of the hospital. The doctor was Dr. Lee Watanabe who also held staff privileges at San Jose and O' Connor Hospitals.¹³ By 1925, since the hospital had drastically declined in use, Dr. Beattie bought the building in 1925 and sold it to the Japanese Association in 1937. Ever since then it has housed a number of practices and organizations.¹⁴

Today, the Kuwabara Hospital is renamed the Issei Memorial Building. It is officially listed as a Historical Landmark and is one of the two original Japanese hospital buildings remaining in California.¹⁵ Currently it houses the Japanese American Citizens League, San Jose Taiko, and the Japanese American Chamber of Commerce.

Hori's Building was constructed in 1905, and was originally two portable classrooms from Grant Elementary School. In 1915, Mrs. Hori, a midwife, bought the two classrooms and moved them to Nihonmachi. It has been located at 580 N. Fifth Street ever since .

She placed the rooms end to end and it became Mrs. Hori's home, boarding house, and midwifery.¹⁵ Many local Nisei claim Mrs. Hori's house as their birth place.

In 1920, Dr. Hisaichi Nakahara, a Hawaiian- born dentist married one of Hori's daughters. After his marriage, he converted the front of Hori's building into his office. While he stayed at Nihonmachi, he founded the American Loyalty League later to become the Japanese American Citizens League.¹⁶ After the Nakaharas moved out, Okamoto used it as a rooming house for a time. Then Mr. Ed Morioka bought it and operated his real estate business until he retired. Today, Morioka rents the building as a duplex.

Churches

Churches were major community institutions in Nihonmachi. The Japanese Episcopal Methodist Church was established in 1895 and has occupied 566 N. 5th Street since 1913. It was significantly remodeled three times and each time a portion of the original 1913 structure has been preserved. It has also had several name changes. In 1939, the name was changed to the San Jose Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church. Then in 1955 it was renamed the Wesley Methodist Church. Finally in 1968, it was named the Wesley United Methodist Church. In 1995, the church had its centennial celebration. This church has an unusual roof treatment with a central parapet with tiled shed- roofed wings. The parapet that extends beyond the corners has a wood trim.

Another place of worship in Japantown is the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin. The temple was established in 1902 and has occupied 649 N. Fifth Street ever since. The architect, George Shimamoto, mimicked his design after the Nishi Hoonganji temples of Kyoto, Japan. The church was completed in 1937 by brothers Gentaro and Shizaburo Nishiura and has been used continuously since then.¹⁷ Today, it is included in the National Registry of Historical Places and is considered the most authentic Buddhist temple in the United States.¹⁸ One of the most impressive features of this temple is its side-gabled roof. It is clad with the traditional clay tiles and has wide flaring eaves with elaborate hand-carved wooden brackets. A raised verandah wraps around three sides of the stucco and timber exterior. There is also a lovely garden that has a fountain, bridge and two ornate lanterns that are typical of temple design.

Entertainment and Sports

Along with the several shops that sprung up in Nihonmachi, there were also several places for recreation and entertainment including several pool halls. A Japanese operated print shop on Jackson Street made labels and printed lottery tickets for the Chinese. With the tickets, gambling runners would come from Chinatown regularly to Japantown to sell lottery tickets to each house or store. Sumo wrestling and baseball were very popular in Nihonmachi. Baseball was played on the Nihonmachi athletic field and was a major community event.

Okita Hall, located at 587 N. 6th Street, was a major attraction spot in Nihonmachi. The building served as the Japanese Hall from the early 1900's and originally had steps. Its primary use was as a theater and played traditional types of plays such as Kabuki and Nanwabushi. Before the World War II, it featured the traditional plays along with comedies, vaudeville shows, magicians, and sometimes opera singers. However, after the war the theater made a swing to silent movies and then later talkies. Eventually when Japanese language television became available, the interest faded in the theatre. After the theater was closed, the stairs were removed and the hall was rented out as a large banquet hall. In 1975, and until now it has been leased to the Japanese martial arts school, San Jose Aikido.

A Cultural and Economic Hub

A 1910 census showed that the Japanese community was almost as large as the Chinese community, its predecessor. Three hundred people worked and lived on Sixth Street. The Dobashi Market opened in 1912 at 224 Jackson Street. Issei Kiosuke Dobashi originally named the store Kinokuniya Shoten, after his hometown, near the River Ki in Japan. The store was the first major competitor to Tuck Wo serving the Japanese Community. Dobashi was originally a one story, wood-framed structure that offered such items as candles, vegetables, and fresh or salted fish. In 1935, the original building was torn down and a new one constructed. After the reconstruction, the store continued to stock Japanese foods along with farm tools, shoes, boots, outboard motors, fishing equipment, and other equipment. After World War II, the store opened at its present location of 240 Jackson Street. The old market's retail space has been leased to restaurants while the living quarters upstairs have been rented as apartments. Today, the old market is occupied by Tsugaru Restaurant.

In the early 1900s, mom and pop stores stayed open until eleven p.m. even on weekends in order to serve the farmers coming in from the countryside for supplies. Gradually, the community became a cultural and economic hub in the valley. Nihonmachi catered to the needs of developing farm communities. Also, peddlers from Nihonmachi visited Santa Clara, Berryessa and other areas to sell tofu, fresh fish and other groceries.

Hotel Tahei, considered a very luxurious hotel of its time was constructed in 1905. It was the largest establishment providing lodging in the area. The hotel had a greater prestige than the typical boarding houses of its era. The first floor was used as the dining room and a lobby

where lodgers could be seen playing the Japanese game Go. Guests occupied the second floor while the third floor was the Akashi Photo Studio, which was very busy with taking photos for birthdays, marriages, and funerals. After the war, the hotel was one of several buildings that arranged and managed hostels for homeless Japanese returning to San Jose. In 1937, the building was remodeled for Camille's Beauty Shop. It was once the only three-story framed building in Japantown. Today, the ground floor is occupied by Hank's Rod and Reel, while the upstairs is rented as apartments. There were also several additions to Japantown, such as new Japanese food and retail shops, soda fountains, medical offices, service stations, and a sake brewery.

Aki's Bakery, a popular sweet shop opened in 1963 on 214 Jackson Street. The shop was opened by Aki Toyoshima, who grew up in Gilroy and then came to San Jose after high school. He got a job baking pies for fourteen years until he saved enough money to open his own shop. It started out as a coffee and doughnut shop and then became specialized in fancy cakes and other goodies. The shop expanded to Meridian Avenue by 1972. The Japantown bakery was closed in 1997 and today, Toyoshima's daughter, Penny Tom, runs the Meridian location.

Turning Point

Life in Nihonmachi was peaceful until December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States government feared that the Japanese-Americans would collaborate with the enemy during World War II, and following President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 on February 12, 1942, there was a massive evacuation of the Japanese from the vulnerable coastal areas. Most of Santa Clara's 3,000 Japanese residents were interned at Heart Mountain, Wyoming.¹⁹ Japantown was completely evacuated and many of the Nisei youth joined the army and went overseas while their families were at concentration camps.

During the war, San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin was used to store the belongings of over twenty families.²⁰ The temple did not escape vandalism or arson, however, and there was extensive damage. The basement was completely gutted in 1942.²¹ Wesley United Methodist Church also stored the belongings of several families.

Although The San Jose Mercury-Herald did not advocate violence, it did encourage the roundup and internment of all Japanese in the country. The newspaper maintained that, "it was impossible to distinguish between Japanese Americans of presumed good will and Japanese zealots and barbarians camouflaged amongst us to do their nefarious jobs."²²

While the Japanese were absent from Nihonmachi, it was occupied by other people. The Filipinos and African Americans quickly rented several of the houses in the community. However, over half of the establishments remained vacant. Hundreds of property leases and equities in land and buildings were lost.

After the War

The Japanese started to come back to Nihonmachi in December 1944, when the internment policy was lifted. However, they did not get a welcoming homecoming. There was resentment and intensified discrimination in the air. Santa Clara County and the cities of San Jose and Morgan Hill passed resolutions that opposed Japanese return to the valley. The Mercury-Herald concurred, saying that, " No Japanese laborers were wanted here."²³

The Japanese had several problems. For example, they had to evict occupants that had occupied their property during the war. There was vandalism and housing shortages. Also, many of them were forced to begin again as tenant farmers as they were unable to regain leased land.

While resettling, there was a population boom. The Japanese population rose from 3,773 to 6,250 in 1946.²⁴ More families including displaced farm families began to move to Nihonmachi and surrounding areas. Between 1947-1950, about 20% of residents and businesses were able to recover their property.²⁵ The number of doctors also increased in the area. There were four physicians, four dentists and two optometrists.²⁶ Again, Nihonmachi became a cultural center.

In time an apology was paid to the Japanese. Santa Clara County and San Jose publicly expressed regret over their role in the war time exclusion. While the San Jose Mercury News joined other major newspapers in endorsing redress. President Truman signed the Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act on July 2, 1948, in which \$38 million was paid to compensate for certain economic losses of the Japanese Americans during the evacuation. Also on August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed HR 442 which provided \$20,000 in payment to each surviving internee and a \$1.25 billion education bond among other provisions.

Notable People

There are several people who have affected Nihonmachi in a major way. They include:

Norman Mineta: Born in 1932 and raised in Japantown, Norman Mineta has had many firsts in his career. Though he faced anti-Asian racism, it did not dim his patriotism and he served in the army before running his father's insurance business. He was the first nonwhite city council member of San Jose, the first Asian-American mayor of a major American City-San Jose, and the first Asian American Cabinet member under President William Clinton and George W. Bush. He served in the House Representatives for over twenty years and is currently the Secretary of Transportation

Dr. Tokio Ishikawa: The doctor and historian in the community, he has lived in Japantown all his life except for during World War II when he was drafted. Ishikawa graduated from medical school at Stanford and opened his practice at the old Kuwabara Hospital. His practice was interrupted by the war but when he returned to San Jose, he opened his practice at his house until 1959, when he accepted a position at San Jose State. Even after retirement he took an active role in the community by educating people about Japantown.

J.B. Peckham Jr.: Although not Japanese, Peckham, a Caucasian lawyer, played an important role in Japantown. Before World War II, when many of the Japanese were not allowed to own land because they were not citizens, he owned it for them in name. During World War II, Peckham protected and cared for the Buddhist church, and numerous other businesses and homes in Japantown. Since there were practically no lawyers of Asian descent at the time, he found himself to be the choice lawyer at the time of the Chinese and Japanese.

Also because of his alliance with the Asians, he was the target of much hate mail. To many of the local Japanese Americans he is considered a hero. He is an example that there were some non-Asians that sympathized with the Japanese.²⁷

Wayne Kanemoto: San Jose's first Japanese American municipal judge. He has spent his entire life in San Jose except for during World War II. In fact he once said, "In my old chambers I could look out my window and see where I was born- where the San Jose Airport is now."²⁸ In 1942, he received his law degree from the University of Santa Clara. He was appointed to a judgeship in the Santa Clara County Municipal Court in 1961, and was sworn in as San Jose's municipal judge on January 3, 1962. Although he has retired after twenty years of being a judge, he has still been active in the community by creating such organizations as the Nisei Democrats of Santa Clara County, and the San Jose Japanese Landscape Gardeners Association.

Holidays and Festivals

There are several holidays and festivals that are celebrated at Nihonmachi. These include:

Nikkei Matsura:

This is an annual arts and crafts festival which features over forty artists with clothing jewelry, pottery, toys and dolls. There are ethnic foods, stories, demonstrations, music, and performances by San Jose Taiko Drummers. It is celebrated on the first Sunday of May from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and is centered on Jackson and Fifth Streets. On the same day is the Nihonmachi Run, a run around Nihonmachi to benefit the Yu-Ai Kai Community Center programs and services.

Obon Festival/ Bazaar:

This is the largest cultural event celebrated at Japantown. This is a two day celebration filled with food and game booths, cultural exhibits, demonstrations, the Chidori Band, San Jose Taiko, and over 500 dancers in full costume each evening. The festival is sponsored by the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin, is held in July, and takes place at Fifth and Jackson Street.

Aki Matsura:

An annual fall festival which features food and crafts. There is a wide variety of entertainment including dancing and Taiko Drummers. This celebration is sponsored by the Wesley United Methodist Church.

Winter Boutique:

Over forty vendors sell beautiful arts and craft selected for their Asian motifs. There is wearable art, jewelry, pottery, house, toys and Christmas decor. The proceeds of this event are used to benefit the Japanese American Resource Center and Museum.

Today

Today, one can look at Nihonmachi and see how it has evolved over the years from a struggling community, to becoming a cultural and economic hub. It has changed from a collection of rooming houses into a focal point for Japanese businesses, regional and recreational activities. There is history in the shopkeepers and residents of the community. There is rich heritage in the community. Restaurants, specialty stores and gift shops reflect the Chinese and Japanese heritage which is meticulously preserved by nearby resident and shopkeepers alike. With the several activities that happen in Japantown, a recent addition to the community is the Farmer's Market that is held every Sunday. Fresh vegetables baked goods and flowers are sold. Japantown continues to serve as a venerable and valuable part of the te greater San Jose Metropolis.

Appendices



San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin



San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin

Appendices



Aikido of San Jose (Okita Hall)

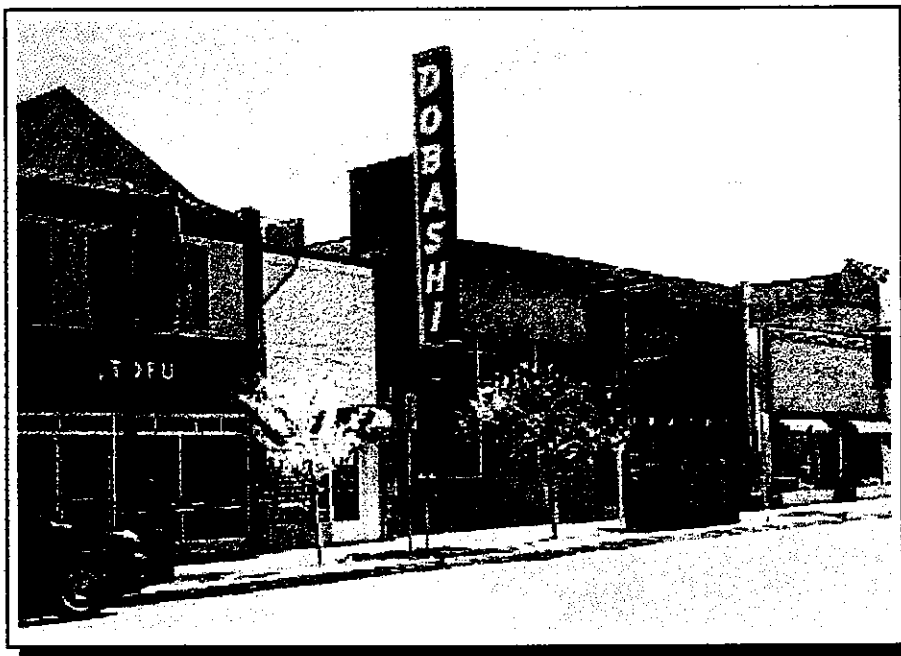


Issei Memorial Building (formerly Kuwabara Hospital)

Appendices



Tsugaru Restaurant (old Dobashi Market)



current Dobashi Market

Appendices



Wesley United Methodist Church



Hank's Rod and Reel (formerly Hotel Tahei)

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