

THE JAPANESE IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY, 1940-1950.

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The history of the Japanese people in Santa Clara County spans the twentieth century and dips back into the nineteenth. For a more complete understanding of the position of the pre-war Japanese community, certain aspects of this long and interesting history should be presented.

Our story begins in 1885 when Japan legalized immigration of her citizens. Prior to this date immigration out of Japan of laborers, agricultural or industrial, was prohibited by a two century old seclusion law designed to close the country from all Western influence. Consequently the United States saw no more than 364 Japanese migrate to her shores before this date.¹ But between 1885 and 1924, when Oriental exclusion was incorporated in the Immigration Act of the United States, more than 200,000 Japanese aliens entered this country. As of 1940 almost 90% of the total Japanese population lived in the four western states of California, Washington, Oregon, and Arizona.²

These immigrants entered through the great Pacific ports of America, of which, San Francisco was the leading. It was natural that these strangers to America would settle locally and a vast majority made California their home. A factor in the concentration on California was the economic opportunity available in a sparsely populated area needing many laborers to mine, build, and farm. Since the majority

¹Yamato Ichihashi, Japanese in the United States(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932), pp. 93-94.

²Dorothy Thomas, The Salvage(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), pp. 3-5.

of the Japanese immigrants were drawn from the agriculturally oriented peasant class, they liked nothing better than to seek work in the expanding California farm industry.³

The fruitful and pleasant Santa Clara Valley, with its proximity to the port of San Francisco and its agricultural industry, naturally drew some of the first immigrants. In 1890 the initial Japanese came to the valley in search of seasonal work and left after the crop was harvested. But the normal aspiration of the average farmworker was to engage as an independent farmer and through the Japanese people's drive and industry this became quite possible. These people developed adjacent orchards and farms, keeping close together because of language and custom difficulties. By 1902 there was a permanent Japanese farming community in San Jose of several hundred persons and an additional 3000 seasonal workers would pass through the area annually.⁴

This first generation of Japanese are known as Issei. They were characteristically drawn from the poorer elements of Japanese society and were almost overwhelmingly male.

One of the most significant events which determined the character of the pre-war Japanese population in 1940 was the 1924 Exclusion Law. The initial effect was to stop all influx of new Japanese immigrants. The common practice of "picture brides", marriage by proxy in Japan, was also halted. The over-all effect of this sudden stoppage will be discussed in detail below. An immediate effect was the prohibition of the Issei to own land. An earlier law, the Alien Land Law of 1913

³Ichihashi, loc. cit., p. 95.

⁴Terakawa, History of the North American Buddhist Association (San Francisco: Arahoshi Publishers, 1936), pp. 101-104.

(Webb-Henry Act), prohibited any Japanese ineligible for citizenship to legally purchase land or hold leases for more than five years. Thus with the 1924 Oriental Exclusion section of the Immigration Act all Japanese not born in the United States could not own land and could hope only to attain tenant status.⁵ The vast majority of the Japanese farmers in the Santa Clara Valley in 1940, 45% of the entire Japanese population, were tenants because of this act. One way to evade this restriction was for the second generation Japanese, Nisei, to have the land title in their name. But because of the scarcity of Japanese women and the fact that the Issei restrained from marriage until they had established themselves, the children were too few and too young to be used in this practice extensively.⁶

In general, the Japanese operated very small holdings and specialized in types of farming that required little capital outlay. As a result of their well established pattern of specialization and intensification they obtained a virtual monopoly in the production of many of the important truck crops. On holdings that averaged only 44 acres, compared to the California average of 230, the Japanese produced 30% to 35% of all commercial truck farm crops grown in California on only 3.9% of the farmland.⁷

As the general pattern usually followed, in Santa Clara County a "Japanese town" soon developed. In the area of Sixth and Jackson Street a separate community grew up in the center of the Japanese farming district of San Jose. It contained shops and small businesses

⁵Jacobus tenBroek, Prejudice, War and the Constitution(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p. 37.

⁶Wayne Kanemoto, San Jose Municipal Court Judge, Nov. 10, 1966 and Dec. 14, 1966.

⁷tenBroek, op. cit., P. 25.

which serviced the needs of the Japanese population.

The Buddhist Church, begun in 1902, by 1940 was the most important unifying force; socially, religiously, and athletically. In the church organization there were men's and women's groups, a young people's organization, athletic leagues, language and Sunday schools, as well as religious services. Considering that up to 77% of the Japanese population between Sunnyvale and Gilroy was Buddhist, the church must be seen as central in holding the community separate from Caucasian society.⁸

A significant aspect of the Japanese population which distinguished it from the rest of the people living in Santa Clara County, and indeed the nation, was the age-sex structure of the Japanese.⁹ At no census taken from 1900 to 1940 did the age-sex structure attain the form of either the classic, tapering pyramid of the mother country or the bulging pyramid with eroded foundation of the area of settlement.¹⁰

Because of the Exclusion Law of 1924 no new immigrants were admitted after that date. Consequently there was a sharp, wide gap between the Issei and the Nisei by 1940. In 1940 the vast majority of the adult Japanese were over 60 years of age and the vast majority of the second generation were under 25. So in 1940 when responsibility and leadership should have been placed in the hands of ambitious and energetic Japanese in the 30 to 50 year old age brackets, it remained in the hands of the diminishing Issei of 60 to 80 years of age. The

⁸ Toshio Murakami, Assistant Minister of the San Jose Buddhist Church, February 11, 1965.

⁹ Refer to age-sex structure chart in the appendix.

¹⁰ Thomas, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

naucity of Nisei at ages when middle-class economic independence is normally achieved meant that many parents were carrying on family enterprises beyond normal retirement age.

This phenomenon also perpetuated the Japanese as tenant farmers, since the American born Japanese were too young to have acquired farms of their own and the only adults were prohibited by law to own or lease land.

So far the position of the Nisei in the Japanese society has been only briefly observed. In 1940, these pre-war Nisei were well educated, substantially above the California norm. The number of Japanese who completed high school was 10% to 15% above that for the California norm and those who completed college were 1% above the norm.¹¹

The reason for this can be found in the Issei's high regard for the value of education. The Issei themselves were an overwhelmingly literate group. For a full explanation one must return to 1867 and the Meiji Restoration in Japan. This restoration was the return, bloodlessly and smoothly, of power from the military to the Imperial family under Emperor Meiji. This event heralded great changes that were to transform the face of Japan.¹² A principal theme of Emperor Meiji's program was education and six years of compulsory education was enforced. The immigrants from Japan were instilled with the value of education and passed this on to their children. Remembering the difficulties they had gone through and knowing the troubles their children would have to cope with, the Issei stressed the fact that

¹¹ Ibid., p. 74.

¹² Richard Storry, A History of Modern Japan (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantine, and co., 1960), p. 101.

education was something that no one could take away from them and encouraged their children to continue in school. Most of the Japanese took full advantage of the California public school system.¹³

Most Japanese children in Santa Clara County also went to Japanese language school. This functioned as part of the Buddhist Church activities since 1903. It was a common sight to see groups of Japanese children walking home from language classes hours after the public schools had let out.¹⁴

Although educational opportunities were given to the Japanese and taken advantage of, employment opportunities were limited. In general the Japanese educated or not, skilled or not, usually found employment only within the Japanese community itself. Even with a higher educational level they were forced to accept jobs far beneath the California norm. Over 20% more of the Issei and 10% more of the Nisei were in unskilled labor than the California norm. Both groups were substantially behind the norm in skilled, semiskilled, and professional occupations in 1940. The only significant shift in occupations between the two generations is in the clerical-sales area. Whereas only 10% of the Issei held positions in this field, over 30% of the Nisei (10% above the norm) fell in this category. This is accounted for by the number of Nisei who although finished with their education, a college degree perhaps, were forced to return to their father's store for work. Some educated Nisei moved out of the farming areas to San Francisco and gained employment in oriental art stores and allied businesses.¹⁵

¹³Kanemoto, op. cit.

¹⁴Terakawa, op. cit.

¹⁵Thomas, op. cit., pp. 38-41.

Not one in ten Nisei was working for a Caucasian-operated firm in this area. The few who had progressed beyond the limits of the Japanese community were on the lower rungs of the urban occupational ladder and held the less desirable jobs. Nisei trained for the professions were similarly limited. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, and optometrists usually served the needs of the Japanese and rarely succeeded in obtaining Caucasian clientele or connections with Caucasian-operated institutions. Engineers, accountants, teachers, and social workers found it almost impossible to practice the skills they had learned.¹⁶

In general the Japanese immigrants of the pre-1924 era had, at the outbreak of the Second World War, made more satisfactory economic adjustments than had their children. Because of the long age gap between the Issei and Nisei, disproportionate numbers of the first generation were working far beyond the usual age of retirement from the active labor force and disproportionate numbers of the second generation were remaining in school beyond the usual age for taking up a career. When the Nisei did attempt to begin a career he found that the only place which would accept him was the Japanese community where he would have to settle for a much lower position for which he was qualified. It was not unusual to see college graduates working on farms and in fruit stands.¹⁷

Connected with the facts that have been discussed but which affected the Japanese in many ways was the "Japanese stereotype". This

¹⁶Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁷Kanemoto, op. cit.

was a special blend of fabrication, myth, and halftruth on the basis of which, in large part, the wartime evacuation was authorized, executed and approved.¹⁸ The development of those opinions and attitudes which gradually congealed in the public mind to form the Japanese stereotype curiously enough traces its beginnings to Gold Rush days, a half century before the Japanese came to California. It was the legacy of the prejudice inherited from the Chinese. Californians could not distinguish Japanese from Chinese and labeled them all "Asiatics" or "Mongolians". It was the hatred of the Chinese, carried over onto the Japanese, that laid the foundation for the Japanese stereotype. The "Asiatic" was thought to be tricky, treacherous, dishonest, immoral, and unreliable.¹⁹

The attitude of Californians toward the Japanese varied, to some extent, with international events. The 1905 Russo-Japanese War and the two decades following, with a strained United States-Japanese relationship and the possibility of war, brought on suspicion and fear of the Japanese in California. Similarly in 1931 and thereafter with the Japanese aggression in Manchuria and China, the attitude toward Japanese-Americans again darkened.²⁰

A significant factor in the public image of the Japanese, and one where the impact is difficult to precisely estimate, was Hollywood. In the early days of motion pictures, movie audiences were acquainted with Orientals only as villains; sinister and inscrutable figures. After World War One and up to 1930, the movie treatment of the

¹⁸ Kanemoto, op. cit.

¹⁹ tenBroek, op. cit., p. 23.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

Japanese had a change for the better, although still pictured as silent, inscrutable, and un¹American. But after 1931 the old theme of the treacherous, spying "Jap" regained prominence.

It was this type of influence which many Japanese feel prevented qualified Japanese men and women from gaining employment in Caucasian society and forced them into a closed society. A common misconception harbored by the people of California was that all Japanese spoke the Japanese language and were still under the influence of a foreign culture. This kind of thinking and the isolated character of the Japanese community prevented any meaningful communication between the rest of society and the Japanese.²¹

Anti-Japanese sentiment, fostered by labor and farm elements, affected some politically ambitious men. Remembering the successes of the anti-Chinese politicians, some local office seekers tried to ascend on the anti-Japanese ticket. Most instances of such tactics occurred in the early part of the century in San Francisco. The Exclusion Law of 1924 was the culmination of such politics and thereafter the attacks subsided.²² But in 1935, 1937, and 1939 anti-Japanese measures once more appeared in California legislation as public opinion gradually began to turn against Japan and the Japanese. During this period, up to 1940, the attention of politicians remained focused primarily upon the domestic problem of the depression.²³

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Kanemoto, op. cit.

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In a May 7, 1900 San Francisco labor rally, Major James D. Phelan declared, "These Asiatic laborers will undermine our civilization and we will repeat the terrible experience of Rome." tenBroek, op.cit.

²³

Ibid., p. 43.

With the advent of World War Two and the evacuation notice, the Japanese population in the Santa Clara County and the whole Pacific slope was to be profoundly affected. The final evacuation was concluded in the Santa Clara Valley on May 29, 1942, with the great bulk of the people of this area sent to the camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming.²⁴ This was a vast camp of 10,700 with the people from this area in approximately the same sections. Such treatment of Japanese-Americans naturally aroused considerable bitterness and disillusionment.²⁵ Some never returned to California and remained in the area of internment, others went east and settled in eastern cities such as Chicago. There were those that were bitter enough to leave the United States entirely and return to Japan.²⁶

Memories of local officials, farm and labor groups plotting and successfully propagandizing to convince the Army to evacuate the Japanese helps account for this post-internment attitude. Many Japanese saw no reason to return to this kind of California and believed that better opportunities lay elsewhere in view of the vast influx of "Oakies" into California since they had been interned. This attitude was particularly strong in the Nisei.²⁷

A very tangible effect of the evacuation was the loss of position of the many tenant farmers in the Santa Clara Valley. Since the great majority of the Japanese farmers in this area were tenants, they were

²⁴ Murakami, op. cit.

²⁵ Heart Mountain Sentinel, June 1, 1943, p.1.

²⁶ George Uchida, Assistant Professor of Physical Education at the University of California, December 28, 1966.

²⁷ Thomas, op. cit., life histories, pp. 151-571.

left homeless after the war. In the case of those who had property, they had to trust Caucasian friends to care for their holdings, and in a good many cases this trust was abused.²⁸

Still more dangerous was the amendment to the Alien Land Law of 1943. This was designed to reclaim Japanese holdings by prohibiting Japanese aliens from purchasing or holding land under their children's names, as some people were doing. The amendment claimed that the intention of this practice was to circumvent the Alien Land Law and enable the Issei to own land. The pressure for and the application of this amendment came mostly from the San Joaquin Valley and the delta areas of Sonoma and Contra Costa Counties where Japanese competition had caused much bad feeling against the now absent evacuees.²⁹

Whereas the earlier Alien Land Law was not enforced as rigidly as it might have been, during the war it and the new amendment were used to their fullest extent to gain the Japanese holdings. But in this aspect the Santa Clara County was markedly different. The application of both laws was held in considerable restraint. The officials of Santa Clara County and the cities of San Jose and Santa Clara were much more level headed and enlightened than in other parts of the state. In fact there were only two or three cases where actual holdings were taken away from absent Japanese. The District Attorney, Mr. Napoleon Menard, refused to exercise the unjust power placed in his hands.³⁰

²⁸James Okida, October 15, 1966 and December 14, 1966.

²⁹Kanemoto, op. cit.

³⁰Ibid.

This enlightened attitude created a sympathetic understanding for the returning evacuees in the last part of 1945. When the bulk of the returning Japanese began arriving in San Jose the buildings of the Buddhist Church were converted into hostels as temporary housing through the efforts of the San Jose Council for Civic Unity. This was a focal point for the relief of the returnees and for the organization of resettlement.³¹

Such action was in striking contrast to other areas of the state where everything was done to prevent the Japanese from returning. Laws were passed and discrimination applied to this end. One particular instance of bad feeling for the returning Japanese was in Monterey County. A National Guard Unit from the Salinas area had been stationed on Bataan and the anti-Japanese feeling resulting from that experience was directed against the returnees.³²

Here in Santa Clara County no such pressure was applied against the Japanese and because of this, and other economic reasons to be discussed below, three times as many Japanese returned to this area than were evacuated in 1942. Many came from the hostile climates of Monterey and San Joaquin Counties to find refuge here.³³

The reasons are not absolutely clear why Santa Clara County was so different. Perhaps it was the academic community and the educated atmosphere which saw the Japanese for what they were, loyal and needy Americans. A more tangible reason was that the economic competition of the other areas was non-existent in the Santa Clara Valley. Also

³¹ Murakami, op. cit.

³² Kanemoto, op. cit.

³³ Murakami, op. cit.

there had been no real history of Japanese conflict in this area as there had been in other parts of the state for decades. For example, in San Joaquin County the Japanese were originally "coolies" who were used by the large farm operations which needed such coolie labor. When the Japanese began to become tenant and independent farmers, thus eliminating part of the work force and creating stiff competition, hatred and bitterness arouse. In this valley there were no great farming enterprises.³⁴

The San Joaquin area was characteristically made up of rural, small communities where Grange and other farm groups were influential. These were the groups and this was the area where the most violent anti-Japanese attitudes arouse. Similarly in the large cities, where business competition caused strong feelings, the Japanese were creating enemies by their lower rates and great numbers. For example, the Japanese cobblers in San Francisco were systematically driven out of business by the other Caucasian firms.³⁵ In the Santa Clara Valley neither of these conditions existed, it had a sort of middle ground of semi-rural, semi-urban elements which produced a favorable climate for all.

A specific wartime development which affected the Japanese in Santa Clara County directly was the perfection of deep freezing techniques and its peacetime application to the strawberry industry. This new process suddenly made strawberry farming extremely profitable.

³⁴ Kanemoto, op. cit.

³⁵ tenBroek, op. cit. p. 49.

Strawberry farming was extremely appealing to the Japanese in particular. The first reason was that it was a high density crop, one in which extensive acreage was not required to realize profit. With a minimum of capital and land a Japanese family could develop one to three acres of land into a profitable farm. This type of situation to the returning and landless evacuees presented an ideal remedy for their difficulties. With the entire family working in the field the financial status improved rapidly.³⁶

But this renewed activity of the Japanese in farming was of a different hue than the earlier involvement of the first immigrants. These newer farmers were not looking forward to life on the farm, these people had other ambitions and sought other means of support. Gradually many became gardeners and others went into nursery and floral businesses. This was accompanied by a slow migration down the valley toward Gilroy with some even departing for the central valley. These people still had vivid memories of the depression days and had little desire to negotiate another such experience as a farmer.³⁷

A typical Japanese returnee would sharecrop for a year or two in the expanding strawberry industry until he could afford to purchase up to three acres. Eventually as his financial position was solidified and as he found some other means of support, he would sell his land to a housing subdivision as part of the California housing boom of the early 1950's.³⁸

³⁶ Kanemoto, op. cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Another beneficial result of the war was the final breakdown of the Japanese stereotype. The war with Japan created a tremendous interest in things Japanese. More and more people, educated or not, were coming in contact with aspects of Japanese culture and society. This and the evacuation experience brought the true character of the Japanese-Americans to public light, in some cases to people who could not tell the difference between Japanese and Chinese, racially or culturally.

The public image of the Japanese as having a separate nation in California with language and moral differences was partially dispelled with the results of an Army survey of all the Nisei in the internment camps. People who could read and write Japanese were needed for intelligence operations in the Pacific war. The results showed that only 3% of the Nisei could read and write Japanese even passably.³⁹

The brilliant record of the some 3000 Nisei in the intelligence service, which gave the American Pacific command extremely exact and precise information, helped dispel any doubts about their loyalty to America.⁴⁰ And then of course there was the famous all Japanese 100th. Infantry Battalion and the 442nd. Regimental Combat Team who went through some of the bloodiest and most grueling combat of the Italian campaign. Some 300 were killed and 650 wounded out of a total of 1300 of the 100th. By V.E. day the 442nd. Regimental Combat Team was referred to as the most decorated unit in United States military history. This

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

remarkable performance, the unabated favorable publicity, and contacts established were undoubtedly factors in promoting community acceptance.⁴¹

This general reappraisal of the Japanese and revision of the old stereotype created a more sympathetic understanding in many communities where people were open-minded. This was true of Santa Clara County and not only did enlightened public servants act sensibly toward the returnees but the business community subsequently opened further opportunities. For the first time since the immigration to America jobs were beginning to open and qualified Japanese were being accepted in greater numbers.

By 1950 the age-sex structure of 1940 had begun to balance itself out to something closer to the norm, with appreciable numbers in the middle age bracket. With the interment and resettlement the Nisei, now ten years older, had learned to take on responsibility and leadership. Definitely unwilling to follow in the footsteps of their Issei parents, they dispersed into other areas of employment. Here the education provided for them by the Issei stood them in good stead.

The pre-war closed community, partly voluntary and partly enforced, was breaking up in a significant sense. In the post-war years the old social cliques began to dissolve and along with intergrated employment came new acquaintances and intergranted social activity. The Nisei who before the war played basketball for the San Jose Zebras in an

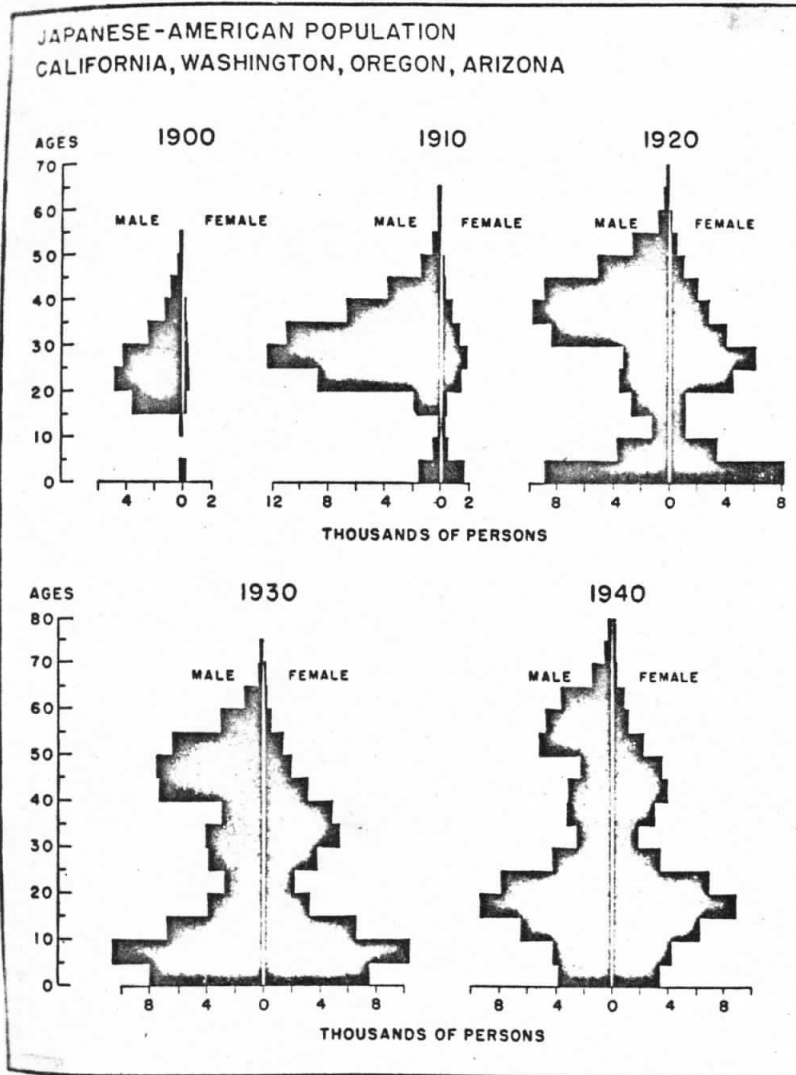
⁴¹ tenBroek, op. cit., pp. 167-169.

all Oriental tournament, now played golf with Caucasian business acquaintances in a club tournament.⁴²

In a comparison of the relative position of the Japanese in 1940 and then in 1950, one can only arrive at the conclusion that the war, with all its unhappy experiences, provided the catalyst that began the process of intergation and acceptance of the Japanese people into society.

⁴²James Okida, op. cit.

Appendix



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