

Japanese Community Building in Fresno County

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Fresno County's Japanese community was initially formed in the late nineteenth century. Following the Meiji Restoration in Japan, increasing numbers of Japanese laborers were able to migrate throughout the Pacific for work. In the 1880s, the Hawaiian government welcomed Japanese laborers to work in American-owned sugarcane plantations. After the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, Japanese immigration also helped to fill California's agricultural labor vacuum.

Starting in the 1890s, Japanese workers were recruited to pick grapes and other crops in Fresno County. "By 1897, nearly 3,000 Japanese grape pickers were working on ranches in the valley."¹ Following the American annexation of Hawaii in 1898, thousands of Japanese workers residing in Hawaii were able to move to the American mainland without needing a visa.² By 1900, census figures show 598 people of Japanese ancestry living in the Fresno County towns of Fowler, Selma, and Biola.³ Most early immigrants to the San Joaquin Valley were single young men who expected to return to Japan with their earnings.⁴ However, many would soon find prosperity in the fertile fields of the San Joaquin Valley and decide to stay.

Beyond working as agricultural laborers, the *Issei*, or Japanese Americans born in Japan, collaborated to begin their own farming operations. In Bowles, near present day Fowler, the Nakagawa and Ninomiya families bought property and planted some of the first vineyards in the area in 1902.⁵ In the next two decades, the rural towns of Del Rey, Reedley, Clovis, Parlier, Kingsburg, Sanger, and Madera developed communities of Japanese farmers. Japanese farmers focused on truck farming for sale to local markets. According to Sally Miller, "By 1920 their agricultural output was ten percent of the total value of California crops, and in the decades leading up to World War II, they produced the bulk of the strawberry, tomato, and snap bean crops, among others, and over forty percent of the onion and green pea crops."⁶

In 1907, the "Gentlemen's Agreement" between the American and Japanese governments restricted passports for Japanese laborers. *Issei* farmers in California, no longer able to move freely between countries, began ordering "picture brides" through Japanese matchmakers.⁷ Often married by proxy while still in Japan, the women would pass through Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay after it opened in 1910. Immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, and India were detained on the island and faced interrogation. Picture brides were required to prove their connection to a Japanese resident already living in California before being allowed into the United States.

¹ "California's Japantowns - Fresno," <https://www.californiajapantowns.org/fresno.html>.

² "A Troubling Legacy: Anti-Asian Sentiment in America," Japanese American Citizens League, 2005, 3.

³ Sharon Hiigel, "The Japanese in Early Fresno" exhibit text, Fresno Historical Society.

⁴ Sally M. Miller, "Changing Faces of the Central Valley: The Ethnic Presence," *California History*, Vol. 74, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 178-180.

⁵ "Historic Site - Bowles, Fresno County," *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, National Park Service, 2004. https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/5views/5views.htm.

⁶ Miller, "Changing Faces of the Central Valley," 179-180.

⁷ Valarie Masumoto, "Redefining Expectations: Nisei Women in the 1930s," *California History* Vol. 73, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 46.

The importation of picture brides was outlawed in 1920 as their arrival fostered increased anti-Japanese sentiment. Chester Rowell, editor of the *Fresno Morning Republican* and leader of the progressive wing of California's Republican Party, warned "against the admission of 'picture brides,' the alleged fertility of whom imperiled white civilization on the West Coast."⁸ He believed the Alien Land Laws were too lenient and advocated for the exclusion of Japanese immigration. Asian immigration grew increasingly restricted, yet the picture brides allowed the Japanese community to grow and establish roots.

By 1913, Fresno County had over 2,200 Japanese residents, and Japanese farmers owned over 5,000 acres. Fearing the Japanese would take over much of the state's agricultural land, California's Congress passed the Webb-Haney Alien Land Act in 1913. The act barred non-citizen aliens from owning land and limited leases to three years. The legislation was aimed at the *Issei* who were ineligible for naturalization due to the Nationality Acts of 1790 and 1870, "which restricted the right of naturalization to aliens who were either 'free white' or of 'African nativity and descent.'"⁹ To get around the restriction, the *Issei* began purchasing land in the names of their *Nisei* children. The *Nisei*, second generation Japanese Americans, were born in the United States, and therefore citizens.¹⁰

As the Japanese community grew in California, they faced increasing prejudice. While anti-Chinese prejudice was a blue collar struggle over competing for wages and lack of assimilation, the anti-Japanese sentiment that grew between 1905 and 1930 was partially because of their success at assimilation and middle-class prosperity.¹¹ During World War I, the United States and Japan were allies, which kept anti-Japanese sentiments to a minimum. Yet after the war, prejudice increased with rising Nativist ideology. As a result, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 which barred immigration from most of Asia. Immigration and birth rates continued to increase. By 1920, over 100,000 Japanese were living in the country, and two-thirds lived in California.¹² The California Alien Land Law was renewed and strengthened in 1920 & 1921. The 1922 Supreme Court case *Ozawa v. U.S.* reaffirmed the notion that Asian immigrants could not become naturalized citizens.¹³ The Immigration Act of 1924 effectively prohibited all Japanese immigration.¹⁴

Despite resistance from the American public, Fresno's *Nihonmachi*, or Japantown, developed beginning in the 1890s near Chinatown across the railroad tracks from downtown Fresno. The neighboring communities in Fresno's ethnic enclave were the Armenians to the east, the Germans from Russia to the west, and the Chinese to the north. Fresno was the largest of the Japanese business districts to develop in the early twentieth century to serve the needs of the growing

⁸ Frank W. Van Nuys, "A Progressive Confronts the Race Question: Chester Rowell, the California Alien Land Act of 1913, and the Contradictions of Early Twentieth-Century Racial Thought." *California History* Vol. 73, No. 1 (Spring 1994), 12.

⁹ "Issei Not Eligible for Citizenship," Neisei Veterans Legacy, <https://www.nvlchawaii.org/issei-not-eligible-us-citizenship>.

¹⁰ *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey of California*, National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/5views/5views4h10.htm

¹¹ Frank W. Van Nuys, "A Progressive Confronts the Race Question: Chester Rowell, the California Alien Land Act of 1913, and the Contradictions of Early Twentieth-Century Racial Thought." *California History* Vol. 73, No. 1 (Spring 1994), 2-13.

¹² Bill Helfman, "'Sun Rising in the Eastern Sky:' Japanese Americans in Washington Township, 1920-1942," *California History* Vol. 73, No. 1 (Spring 1994), 60.

¹³ "Immigration Timeline," Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/timeline.html>

¹⁴ "A Troubling Legacy," 4.

Japanese agricultural community in the San Joaquin Valley. "By 1910, the Japanese population in Fresno County grew to 2,233 with 122 businesses and 9 organizations; and doubled in size by 1920 to 5,732 residents with 187 businesses."¹⁵

Riichi Kamikawa operated the Hinode Hotel before deciding to open his own business with his brothers, Mitsuji, Masuichi, and Koichi Kamikawa brought over from Japan. They built an impressive business empire that began with the Kamikawa Brothers general store on Kern Street between G Street and China Alley, which opened in 1901. The general merchandise store sent regular supply wagons to outlying farms and communities, and the brothers opened branch stores in Selma, Del Rey, and Hanford. In 1902, the Kamikawa Brothers established the Japanese American Bank in San Francisco with a branch in Fresno to service Japanese farmers. By 1905, the brother's business enterprise included an import-export company, as well as "a tailor shop, a public bath...a grocery, a Western-style restaurant, and a hotel" on Kern Street in Fresno.¹⁶ The store moved and grew before finding a home on the southwest corner of G Street at Kern with the hotel above. The Kamikawa's faced financial difficulty in the coming years as they extended credit to farmers who were not always able to pay. After closing their bank in 1912, they divested themselves of their businesses in the difficult years of the 1920s. By 1936, they finally closed their store and Riichi Kamikawa returned to Japan. In 1938, the building was rented by Kanichi Komoto who opened a department store. After he returned from internment, Komoto purchased the building in 1948 and operated his store there, with the Asia Hotel above, until 1993.¹⁷

In 1915, young Sanichi Uyemmaruko purchased the Nakamura Cyclery at 847 F Street from Joe Nakamura after two years working in agriculture. Uyemmaruko dropped the U-Y-E from his name to make it easier for whites to pronounce. The store reflected this change and became Maruko Cyclery. Maruko and his oldest son, Kenji, fixed flat tires on wooden rims for the immigrant farm workers in the area whose bicycles were their only transportation. By the 1930s, the cyclery expanded to sell general sporting goods, guns, and hobby supplies. Uyemmaruko's daughter-in-law, Keiko Maruko, remembered, "That store was famous for kids to hang out. Parents would call the store and ask 'Is my son there?'"

Like many others, the Maruko family was forcibly relocated to the Fresno Assembly Center and later the Rohwer Internment Camp in Arkansas. While interned, the Maruko family was fortunate enough to have a friend to run the shop in their absence. Many Japanese businesses and properties were sold or mismanaged during the internment. After their return to Fresno, the Maruko family reopened the cyclery in 1947 at 1153 F Street and lived in the back of the shop. In the early 1960s, the Maruko Cyclery became the first Honda motorcycle dealership in Fresno. The manufacturer would ship the motorcycles in pieces to the shop and Kenji Maruko would put them together based on his knowledge of bicycles. Kenji Maruko sold the business in 1988 and it became Fresno Honda.¹⁸

Fresno's Japantown featured social and community organizations, schools, and churches for its growing population. The Fresno Betsuin Buddhist Temple was originally built in 1902 at Kern and E Streets. Although it was destroyed by a fire,

¹⁵ "California's Japantowns - Fresno," <https://www.californiajapantowns.org/fresno.html>.

¹⁶ "California's Japantowns - Fresno - Kamikawa Brothers," <https://www.californiajapantowns.org/fresno.html>.

¹⁷ Cheryl White, "Four Sites from Former Japantown Added to State Survey," *The Fresno Bee*, January 18, 1980.

¹⁸ Brad Shirakawa, "Japanese Americans: Maruko Cyclery," Fresno Historical Society Archives.

the temple was rebuilt in 1920 with a boarding house, baseball diamond, tennis court, basketball court, and space for sumo wrestling and track tournaments.¹⁹ In 1906, Reverend Zenijiro Hirota directed the construction of the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church at 1260 Kern. "The Okonogi Byoin in the City of Fresno was probably the first Japanese hospital in the state." Established by Dr. Bunkuro Okonogi, the Okonogi Byoin was in operation by 1901 and a formal hospital was built in 1923 at E and Mono Streets.²⁰ During internment, Dr. Okonogi served his patients in the Pinedale Assembly Center and at the Poston, Arizona internment camp before returning to Fresno.

Parents often sent their *Nisei* children to Japanese language schools or sumo wrestling clubs. Young business men joined the Japanese Young Men's Association, and the Fresno Athletic Club, a *Nisei* baseball league lead by Kenichi Zenimura. In Bowles, the Nakayama Social Club was formed in 1918. Young Japanese women joined cultural organizations that taught traditional dress and dance. *Nisei* young women struggled to balance their parent's expectations with an American culture that was offering opportunities outside the domestic sphere for the first time. By the 1930s, the young women who did not want to marry and settle down sought education through vocational training schools like Milady's Sewing School. Upon receiving their diploma, students could find work at a dress shop, seamstress, or laundry. Education was a rare opportunity for ethnic women to work outside the home.²¹

Despite the overt hostility and institutional discrimination faced by the Japanese, they still expressed their American patriotism. On September 12, 1939 the Fresno community gathered together to celebrate the friendship between the native born of Japanese and the United States. R. Oto, former president of the Fresno County Young Men's Association League dedicated the stone lantern on an island in Lake Washington Fresno's Roeding Park near the Japanese Tea Garden. The lantern was eleven feet tall and three tons, making it "one of the largest of its kind in America." Mayor Frank A. Homan presided over the ceremony, and Congressman B.W. Gearhart also attended, where he exclaimed "America is a nation of the nations. Its people are of the world and in them flows the blood of almost all the nations, made up of the best, the bravest and most courageous which all the other nations could contribute."²² During World War II, the lantern was quietly removed and discarded. Over fifty years later, the lantern was recovered and "re-dedicated in the Shinzen Japanese Friendship Garden at Woodward Park."²³

¹⁹ "California's Japantowns – Fresno – Fresno Betsuin," <https://www.californiajapantowns.org/fresno.html>.

²⁰ "Historic Site – Okonogi Hospital Site, Fresno County," *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, National Park Service, 2004.

²¹ Masumoto, "Nisei Women in the 1930s," 46-50.

²² "Japanese Give Massive Stone Lantern to City," *The Fresno Bee*, September 13, 1939.

²³ "California's Japantowns – Fresno – Stone Lantern," <https://www.californiajapantowns.org/fresno.html>.