

Land

Continued from Page C1

factor in creating immigration to the United States.

Sons who were not lucky enough to inherit land had no choice but to seek jobs in the cities, said Ng. He said many of these young men decided instead to come to America in hopes they could strike it rich, build up a nestegg and return to Japan to buy their own land.

Ng said many Japanese immigrants originally went to Hawaii to work but moved on to California to escape the harsh plantation life they found in the islands.

Although the Japanese immigrants encountered discrimination from the start, they were initially welcome in California — as long as they kept their place. Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had created a labor vacuum in the state. As more and more Chinese laborers began to go into business for themselves — opening laundries, restaurants and small retail shops — the need for new workers became greater.

"In many ways Japanese immigrants followed the Chinese," said Ng. They took jobs formerly held by the Chinese in lumber, mining, railroads and agriculture. All menial jobs which the whites did not want were open to the Japanese.

But as the Japanese attempted to better their lot they encountered ever increasing hostility. As they began to strike out on their own by reclaiming marginal farmland or leasing property to grow their own crops, they became an economic threat to white farmers.

"Economics can make race relations a dog-eat-dog type of thing," Ng observed.

As the Japanese grew more successful, whites responded with oppressive tactics. In 1910, for example, 27 anti-Japanese proposals were introduced in the state legislature. In 1913 the Alien Land Law was adopted, making it illegal for non-citizens to own land or lease it for more than three years at a time. The Japanese Exclusion League, which maintained Asians could not be assimilated and that they would take jobs away from Americans and marry white women, was organized in 1920.

In addition to the economic clash, Japanese immigrants were opposed on cultural grounds.

"Early Asian immigrants were seen as a biological threat," said Ng. "It was the idea of the yellow peril. Then in 1904-05, when Japan defeated Russia (Russo-Japanese War) the

established in 1889 (the existing building was constructed in 1920), continues to provide a link to the past by offering classes in Japanese language and culture.

Census figures show that by 1920 there were 5,732 Japanese living in Fresno County. The figures do not show that these persons were being denied privileges most Americans took for granted during the 1920s and 30s.

Numerous nisei (second generation) Japanese came up through the American school system, earned college degrees and then discovered whites would not hire them.

Fred Hirasuna, one of the founders of Sunnyside Packing Co. and the Strawberry Exchange Cooperative and a man who has been active in the Japanese American Citizens League from its inception in the 1930s, said it was not unusual for Japanese college graduates with degrees in fields like chemistry or engineering to be forced to take jobs working for relatives in the produce business prior to World War II.

Hirasuna said he cannot recall a single Japanese teacher being hired by a Fresno County school district prior to the war and said in those years Fresno State University officials would frequently advise Japanese students to forget about trying to enter the teaching profession because employment opportunities were so limited.

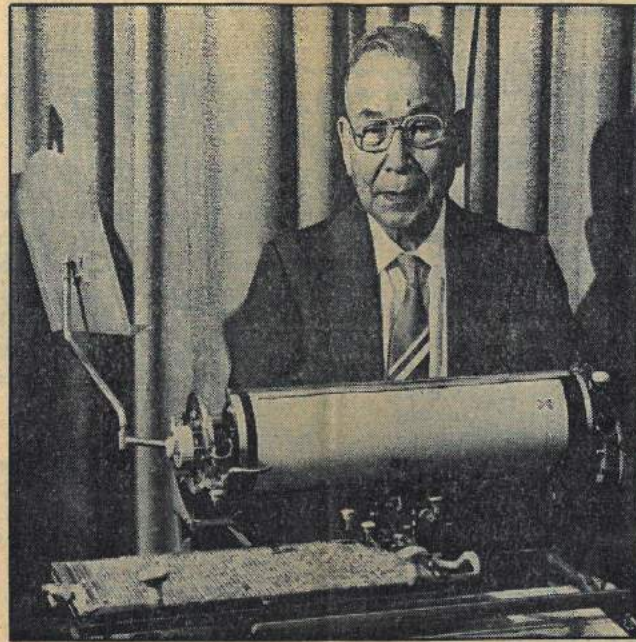
While growing up in Lodi, Hirasuna was not allowed to go swimming in the municipal pool because he was Japanese. When Hirasuna attended a movie at a theater in Delano in the 1930s, he discovered all Japanese were required to sit in a special section off to one side.

Discouraging as conditions were in the 1920s and '30s, the Japanese would face even harder times in the 1940s.

"If you kept up with the news you could see something was going to pop," said Hirasuna. "Yet when it (Pearl Harbor) came it was a shock. You began to wonder 'what the hell are they (whites) going to do?'"

The anti-Japanese feelings which boiled over in the months after Pearl Harbor have been chillingly preserved on the pages of the daily newspaper. The Fresno Realty Board adopted a resolution calling for all Japanese to be taken into protective custody. The Associated Farmers of Fresno County adopted a resolution calling for all enemy aliens to be removed from the state.

The "Japanese problem" was discussed daily in letters to the editor. One reader suggested the Japanese be put to work building a coast-to-coast highway. Another urged



Masao Araki has taught Japanese language classes for a number of years. Here, he operates a Japanese typewriter.

dignity," said Ng. "The Japanese were asked to become stateless persons."

Ng said the issei (first generation) fathers were hit the hardest by relocation. These men, traditional providers of food and shelter, suddenly found themselves stripped of the ability to care for their families.

"It was a psychological blow," said Ng.

After the war, Ng continued, many Japanese did not want to talk about their camp experiences.

"They blamed themselves for it," he said. "They internalized the guilt. They had the feeling they were responsible."

"My family didn't really talk about what happened," said Fresno

attorney Anthony Ishii, who was born after the war. "But we knew something had happened."

The war itself opened up new opportunities for the Japanese. Many who had college degrees found their skills were in demand and took jobs in other parts of the country. Conditions got even better as the post-war economy accelerated.

"Many who suffered in the 1930s did well in the 1950s and 60s," said Ng.

But while the end of the war brought new opportunities, it also brought new trials for Japanese-Americans who chose to return to the Central Valley.

In Visalia, a mass meeting was held at the local baseball park to stir



George and Josephine Iwahashi have operated the Tokiwa Sukiya restaurant in Fresno for many years. Iwahashi was a cook at the Poston, Ariz. relocation camp during World War II.

up sentiment to keep the Japanese from returning.

Billboards proclaiming "No Japs Wanted In This District" popped up in some valley towns. Rifle shots and rocks shattered windows of the homes occupied by Japanese who had returned.

Hirasuna, who had voluntarily moved his family to Mankato, Minn., to avoid spending the war years in a relocation camp, said he thought long and hard before deciding to return to Fresno in the winter of 1947. During the war years he had kept up his subscription to The Fresno Bee and had read about the hostile attitudes many valley residents had toward the Japanese. When he did decide to move back he came alone to "scout out" the situa-

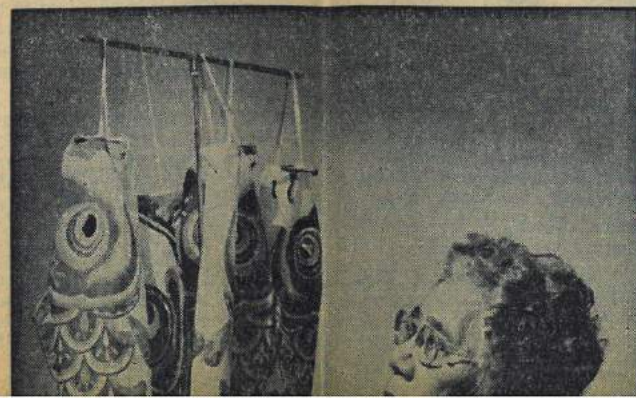
love of learning as key elements in the success story.

The cultural values of the Japanese were very similar to those of the white middle class, said Ng. When the Japanese first arrived in California their values were seen as a threat to whites. But years later these same values would be the building blocks for success.

Among the Japanese there is a competitive spirit that can be traced back to the days when residents of the various islands of Japan tried to outdo each other, said insurance executive Mike Iwatsubo.

While this spirit has at times created some enmity among families, he said, it has also been a strong motivating force.

Iwatsubo also cited the Japanese tradition that makes it wrong to d-



tomia, Japanese farmers found ways to succeed.

By 1910 the Japanese were producing 70 percent of the state's strawberries. They introduced peas to the Visalia area, started growing watermelons in the Dinuba area and were among the first truck gardeners in Delano. By 1919 the total value of crops grown by Japanese farmers was \$67 million — one tenth the total state output.

Some Japanese farmers did strike it rich but most had to specialize in stoop-labor crops not favored by white farmers.

In Fresno, early Japanese immigrants congregated in "Japan-town," an area bounded by Free-way 99 and Tulare, G and Mono streets. For decades the area was a center for social, economic, religious and political activity. The Fresno Buddhist Church on Kern Street,

nese Association collected \$1,400 in a door-to-door canvass of Japanese residents and presented the money to local civil defense officials to be used to purchase an ambulance. But the effort did little to dispel anti-Japanese feelings.

When relocation orders were announced, Japanese families had to sell their possessions, get rid of their pets and leave everything behind. Farmers had to make arrangements for others to take care of their land.

The Federal Reserve Bank estimated Japanese-Americans lost \$400 million as a result of relocation. After the war the government paid \$38 million in claims, a figure which worked out to be less than 10 cents on the dollar.

But the effects of relocation went far beyond financial losses.

"Relocation was the ultimate in-



Tomike Kuwamoto inspects some koi nobori, paper fish which the Japanese traditionally fly on Boy's Day, May 5. Kuwamoto came to the U. S. in 1921. Her family has operated The Aki Co. hardware store since 1901.

who had leased their land and stored their belongings often found their farms had fallen into disrepair and thieves had looted their possessions. Even so, they were better off than those who lost their farms.

"I had an 80-acre ranch in Delano," said Hirasuna. Unable to keep up the payments without working it, Hirasuna signed the ranch over to a friend. "But we never got it back."

Some white farmers acted fairly, operating Japanese farms during the war and returning the land in good condition when the Japanese returned. But these arrangements were few and far between.

A number of factors are mentioned when the discussion turns to why the Japanese-Americans have been able to succeed so dramatically in the face of big obstacles.

William Hosokawa, in his book "Nisei, The Quiet Americans," lists hard work, honesty, humility, obedience, loyalty, respect for parents and

stress the importance of responsibility and tell their children "when people laugh at you they laugh at the whole family."

One incident which illustrates Iwatsubo's point remains vivid in Hasegawa's mind.

"My father taught us never to do anything that would bring shame to the family," she recalled. "Once when I was in seventh or eighth grade I picked a plum from a neighbor's tree on my way home from school. When my father found out about it he made me take it back to the farmer and apologize to him."

But Hasegawa said education probably is the backbone of the Japanese success story.

"In Japan, 99 percent of the people are literate," she said. "The Japanese have always put an emphasis on education. There was a feeling that unless you were educated you could not succeed."

"I always knew I had to go to college," said Jeanette Ishii, manager of governmental affairs for the Fresno City and County Chamber of Commerce. "I knew my aunts and uncles and grandfather were very well educated. I felt a responsibility to do well. It was very important to my parents."

Today the number of Japanese-Americans living in the four-county Central Valley is approaching 10,000 (7,600 were counted in the 1970 census). Their contributions down through the years have been numerous.

In agriculture they played vital roles in establishing the present marketing system for fruits and vegetables. They have helped reclaim marginal land, introduced new crops and, in the early days, provided much-needed labor. The Japanese are known as good farmers who keep their operations looking neat as a pin.

The Japanese influence can also be seen in local landscaping — Ikebana, koi fish, Japanese gardens and bonsai are typical examples of Fresno's Japanese connection.

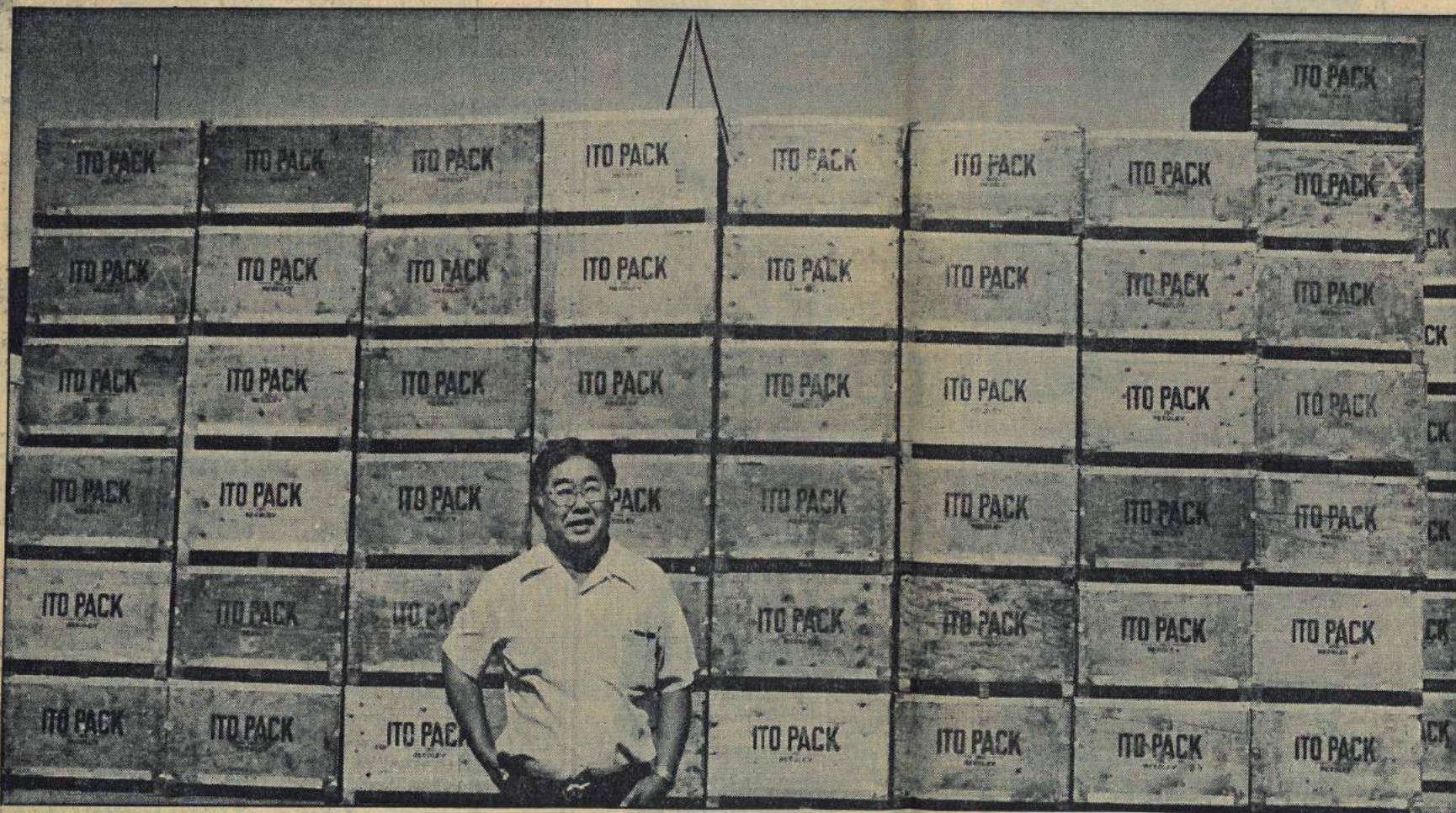
Today Japanese can be found working in most of the professions, most notably pharmacy, engineering, dentistry, education and medicine.

There has also been a rebirth of interest in the Japanese culture.

"Modern Japan is a nation you can be proud of," Ng observed.

Progress and change in Japan make the Japanese culture in the Central Valley of interest for another reason, said Iwatsubo. "The spirit of Japan (that traditional feeling of banding together to help each other) is greater in Fresno than it is in Japan," he said.

Above all, the Japanese have proved that East and West can meet — at least in Fresno.



Jim Ito is a good example of Japanese contributions to Valley agriculture. Ito started with a 10-acre farm and now operates a multi-million-dollar fruit packing business employing more than 500 persons at peak seasons. Along the way, he developed the Red Jim nectarine and the Rose-Ito grape.

Bee photos by Paul Kuroda