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The First Japanese in America

By no means did I feel pleasant with the way those Californians treated me. It is a world-known fact that they hate Japanese. While I have been there four years I never went out to the parks, for I was so frightened of those savage people, who threw stones and bricks at me. . . . And I was spat on more occasionally.

—Yoshio Markino, 1897

Earlier Japanese residents faced much greater problems, of course, than those of today. Most early newcomers planned to return to Japan, but many never made the homeward journey.

Until the Meiji government opened Japan to the outside world in the 1860s, Japanese were forbidden to leave the country. One did get here before then, though. In 1841 a young fisherman named Manjiro was blown out to sea. He was eventually rescued by an American ship and taken to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he was adopted by a whaling captain and took the name “John Mung.” Manjiro/Mung became the best-known Japanese among Americans at that time. In 1851 he

returned to Japan, risking death to do so. Fortunately for him, by then he knew so much about the Western world and the United States in particular that he was too valuable for the authorities to imprison or execute.

Some of the information he gave to officials in Japan sounds surprising. In America, he reported, "refined people do not drink intoxicants, and only a small quantity if they do. Vulgar people drink like the Japanese." He also stated that "there are no baths in that country like those of Japan, but they use a bathtub," and that "toilets are placed over holes in the ground. It is customary to read books in them."

When it came to relationships between the sexes, "both American men and women make love openly and appear wanton by nature," he said, and "for their wedding ceremony, the Americans merely make a proclamation to the gods, and become married, after which they usually go on a sightseeing trip to the mountains. They are lewd by nature, but otherwise well-behaved."¹

*On the same subject, when Japan opened its doors to the West later on in the century, one early visitor found that "a Japanese courtship and wedding are both very curious ceremonies, and still somewhat savour of barbarism"!*²

In 1868 a group of 149 Japanese went to Hawaii, the first to leave without sanctions, followed by other groups to Hawaii in that decade. In 1869 a group of twenty-two arrived to start a tea and silk company under the leadership of a German merchant, John Henry Schnell, whose wife was Japanese. In 1871 Schnell and his family left for parts unknown, after learning that neither tea nor mulberry trees for silkworms would grow on the island.

Students were also sent from Japan as a part of the country's push to modernize, which was synonymous with learning Western ways. In 1871 a group of little girls ranging in age from 6 to 14 were sent to America in order to learn how to be good wives and mothers, Western style. Sutomatsu Oyama arrived in the United States

at age 11 and left when she was 22. As the wife of the minister of war in Meiji Japan, she was active in the Rokumeikan, the upper-class entertainment center that emulated Western society in the 1880s. However, she never really learned to write Japanese well, and like many of those who return to Japan from overseas assignments today, Sutehatsu learned that "Japanese society does not take kindly to those who have experienced something different, or who have special ability, particularly if they are female."³

Poor harvests in Japan and a heavy land tax were incentives for immigration in the 1890s. Rather than students, these immigrants were young single men seeking their fortunes. Often they were younger sons, farm boys who hoped to make it rich and return home. Because of discrimination and the lack of opportunity, many were never able to achieve their goal. Some, too, came to escape military service.

Along with the farmers came those from the seamier side of life, the rough characters, prostitutes and gamblers who preyed on the new settlers, most of whom came from the poorer, southern part of Japan, the Inland Sea area or Kyushu.

A "gentlemen's agreement" in 1907 prevented more laborers from entering; Japan agreed that only families would be allowed to emigrate. "Picture brides"—wives selected by choosing from photographs—were still permitted, until 1921.

What must these young women have felt as they set sail for a land so far away? Did they dream of streets paved with gold, a life of comfort beyond what they had known in Japan? If so, they were soon disabused of such ideas when faced with the requirements of hard work on the farm, plus all the burdens of housework and children, far from family and friends.

Evangeline Lindsley grew up in Washington state when it was a prime destination for Japanese immigrants. Looking back to the early twentieth century from

the perspective of her ninety-nine years, she remembers those young Japanese wives:

When the brides arrived in Tacoma, the first thing that the bridegrooms did when they met them at the boat was to take them uptown to the department store and buy them a pair of American shoes and put them in a corset in an American store—and the poor little things never knew how to clump along in the high heels—and those little tight skirts, you know.

[On our farm] we had a fellow named Kaboda and he married the prettiest little Japanese girl. Oh, she was so pretty! She was just a doll. And the first thing he did was to put her in those high-heeled patent leather button shoes, and he bought her a purple princess suit and put her in a corset. That was a tight-fitting suit, all new, and the skirts were kind of long. My father said, "Kaboda, what in the world have you done to that charming little wife of yours?"

Kaboda declared that now his wife was American, and she must dress American.

Becoming American was not an easy process for the Japanese women, especially, says second-generation Japanese-American Kikei Kikumura. Without the support system of family and friends, unable to speak English, kept at home by family responsibilities, and faced with discrimination, wives and mothers found life especially hard. It took a special kind of strength to survive in this hostile land. Kikumura's mother, Michiko Tanaka, like other Japanese women, may have appeared "submissive," she writes, but such outward submissiveness hid an "inner strength and courage" that kept the family going. Tanaka's own mother exhibited the strength of many Japanese women. It was she who ran the family business, as well as the family, to the point that her husband was actually afraid of her.⁴

Loyalties must have been strained for those early Japanese-Americans, unable to hold citizenship in their

adopted country. Evangeline Lindsley recalls an incident involving a well-liked farmworker named Sasaki:

This was after 1912, because Woodrow Wilson was President of the United States, and William Jennings Bryan was his secretary of state, and we were having some flare-up with Japan at the time. Sunday morning it was, and Sasaki came up with the contractor who had contracted with my father. He wanted to know, if it were necessary, would my father release him from the contract.

My father said, "Why do you want to break the contract? Why don't you want to carry it through?" Oh, they wanted to do that. "Then why are you asking me this?"

Well, they hemmed and hawed around, and finally Sasaki said, "Maybe we go back to Japan."

My father said, "Do you want to go back? Don't you like it here?"

"Oh, no," Sasaki said, "I don't want to go back. I like it here."

"Why do you think you have to go?"

Of course my father knew. He said, "Sasaki, you mean you think that you can't stay here?"

"Maybe I have to go back," he said.

Then my father found out that they were in the reserves, they were all subject to military duty, and if they got called back to Japan, they had to go. So Dad said, "Why, Sasaki, you wouldn't go back and fight us, would you?" Oh, no, he didn't want to do that, but maybe he'd have to go back. So my father said, "Well, if you have to go, then I will release you from the contract."

Of course, nothing came of that, because Bryan came out to California and met the Japanese foreign minister and they settled it some way or other, and they

were not called up, but don't you see, they were ready to go. . . .

Then there's another story. Sasaki had a baby that was born on our farm. They had a big name day, a big celebration, and they invited us down. They had it in our hop house, the place where the hops were dried, and they had big white cloths stretched the whole length of the drying room. Down at the end they erected a kind of an altar, and the picture of the emperor was there—I can still see that—and they dedicated the baby to the emperor. When the baby was born, Sasaki brought him up to show him to us, and I had just learned—I think I was in the sixth or seventh grade—that any child born in the United States was an American citizen, so I said, "Oh, we have a little new American citizen!"

"No," said Sasaki, "He is Japanese! Japanese!" . . .

"So that made me understand," says Miss Lindsley, "why the Western people were so suspicious of the Japanese during the war, as to who was loyal and who was not, although it was a terrible injustice. What was so terrible about it was not just that they separated them from the rest, but that they didn't protect their property. That was what was worse, I think."

The internment during World War II of more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, in violation of their constitutional rights is a blot on American history. Internment in what my friend Vickie and other nisei call "concentration camps" was the culmination of years of discrimination in America. The California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1930 first restricted and then prohibited *issei*, first-generation Japanese-Americans, from owning or leasing land. Nor could they become citizens.

In spite of the many hurdles faced by Japanese immigrants in America, Japanese-Americans fought for acceptance and are currently considered "model" citi-

zens. Because of this, those who now come from Japan owe these early Japanese settlers a debt of thanks for making their acceptance a little easier.

Japanese sojourners today don't face the obstacles that their countrymen did in an earlier period, but that doesn't mean they don't have problems of their own.