The Road to Poston

A Brief Historical Summary

The First Steps in America

In 1869 two small groups of Japanese agriculturalists found their way to California. Even at that it was another fifteen years before the Japanese government permitted laborers as a class to emigrate. These initial steps notwithstanding it was not until 1891 that the number of Japanese coming to the United States exceeded a thousand a year.

The majority of these new arrivals were young, unmarried men who were under twenty-five years of age. Many of these Japanese workers found employment on the America's expanding rail system or as seasonal agricultural workers in the West's fields. They were *dekaseginin*, a term that described individuals who temporarily left their native places to seek employment and supplement their family incomes. Later, the word *Issei* came into popular usage; the first generation of Japanese in the United States—the pioneer generation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, these Issei employed throughout the west, especially in agricultural. The goal of these young immigrants was to work hard, save their money and eventually return to Japan. In this respect they saw themselves as sojourners. As time passed, it became apparent to the Issei that the attainment of their financial goals would take longer than they had anticipated.

These were healthy young males who were the product of a society that placed strong value on filial piety, progeny and the continuation of the family line. A major impediment facing these men was the disproportionate distribution of Japanese males to females. Other constraints on marriage included strong cultural morays regarding marriage with non-Japanese and from 1905 on, racially restrictive state miscegenation laws.

Issei men married prior to emigration simply called their wives to join them. Others, who had the financial resources returned to Japan to be married and then accompanied by their new partners returned to the United States. The third and most numerous group relied on the *Shashin Kekkon*, or picture marriages. Brokered by families or friends, photos and letters were exchanged with no obligation by either party implied. If agreeable to both parties and their families the woman's name would be entered in her new husband's family register or *koseki*, as his wife. Under Japanese law, this administrative transfer constituted a legally concluded marriage. The newly registered wife was then eligible to apply for a passport for the purpose

of joining her husband in the United States, avoiding the restrictive immigration laws put in place by the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement. In 1924 Congress ordered a cession of all Japanese immigration.

Like virtually all the immigrants who had come to this country, the ultimate goal for these men and women was to build their homes, raise their families and make their fortune. The Issei however, soon found themselves facing racially inspired legal restriction to the attainment of their American dream. Because of their nationality they were to be denied one of the most cherished rights of any people; the ownership, use and enjoyment of land. In 1913 the California Legislature passed the Haney-Webb Act which denied the Issei the right to own agricultural land. This was further amended and strengthened in 1920 to forbid leasing or sharecropping by the Issei. Eventually, ten states would pass similar laws directed against Japanese immigrant farmers.

In 1922 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Ozawa v. United States that all Asian immigrants were ineligible to become American citizens. Although their American born Nisei children could hold American citizenship the Issei, already denied land rights, now found it was impossible for them to ever become citizens of the United States. With the arrival of the Nisei, the second generation, a new term began to come into common use—*Nikkei*. A Nikkei was any person of Japanese ancestry living in the United States.

Trouble Along the Way

Throughout the 1930s West Coast states attempted to strip Issei fishermen of their commercial licenses. Men who had pioneered the great tuna industry were forced to devote precious time and resources to fight off the attacks that continued from those who wanted the same restrictions applied to the sea as found in the alien land laws.

As relations between Japan and the United States began to deteriorate in the late1930s and early 40s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began wide ranging screening of West Coast Issei. They were eventually places on lists labeled "A", "B" and "C." In case of trouble with Japan, those on the "A" list were to be detained immediately. Those on the "B" list picked up as required and placed under direct surveillance. Those on the "C" list were allowed to continue living as they had been but placed under periodic watch.

Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 produced immediate war inspired hysteria, exacerbated by outright misinformation resulting in an environment of fear, hostility, and suspicion. These factors taken with the West Coast's long history of anti-Asian agitation saw forty years of anti-Japanese enmity come boiling to the surface; bursting

through the thin veneer of civility that until then had only very tenuously held these base emotions in check.

Executive order 9066

At the urging of the Army, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 9, 1942. What followed the issuance of the order was the abrupt termination of all the Nikkei communities on the West Coast and Western Arizona. The force of the order detained 112, 000 individuals, 70,000 of whom were American citizens by virtue of their place of birth. All were ultimately exiled from their West Coast homes from 1942 until 1945 and beyond. Most of these impounded people were placed in ten concentration camps run by the War Relocation Authority and three camps administered by the United States Department of Justice.

Over 18,000 of these impounded people were sent to three internment camps at Poston, Arizona. Built on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, these camps were administered for the first year and a half by the then, Office of Indian Affairs (OIA, today the BIA). What set Poston's three camps apart from other WRA camps was the intense and active involvement of the OIA in the operation of Poston.

For three years the Nikkei detainees held at Poston lived, as one member of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) put it, "On a reservation within a reservation." During those war years two disenfranchised peoples were held under the watchful eyes of both the Office of Indian Affairs and the War Relocation Authority.

Post War Years

Following the end of the World War II many of the Nikkei detainees returned to the West Coast to rebuild their lives and communities. Others chose not to return and built new lives elsewhere.

Over the past twenty years, contacts between the Colorado River Indian Tribes and former Poston detainees have been established. Today, elements of the Nikkei and CRIT communities are working together to develop resources that will document, preserve and ultimately restore a potion of what

remains of Poston's three camps. Represented are the experiences of two peoples thrown together by the forces of history who now seek to tell the story of the Colorado River Indian Tribes and the Nikkei.

Top photo: **Jon Villalobos** (back to camera) talking with the Poston Memorial Monument (PMM) Committee members in Sacramento (4/30/02).
Bottom photo: In addition to **Jon**, two CRIT staff members discussing the ***Poston Restoration Project*** with the PMM committee members at the Sacramento Buddhist Church. April 30, 2002.

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