

# Japanese Americans in Arizona

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The area known today as Arizona has hosted multiple civilizations for thousands of years. During the first millennium AD, the Huhugam established villages in Arizona's Lower Gila Valley and the Sonoran Desert of northern Mexico. Distinct indigenous cultures, including the Maricopa, Navajo, Apache, Walipai, Yavapai, Aravaipai, Pima, Pinal, Chiricahua, Cocopah, Hopi, Havasupai, Pascua Yaqui, Kaibab-Paiute, and Quechan coexisted throughout the area. However, with Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century and the establishment of settlements, tensions flared between colonists and Indian nations.

The region underwent more dramatic change as a result of the 1821 Mexican Revolution in which Mexico overthrew Spanish rule and as the belief in Manifest Destiny motivated the arrival of land-seeking American families and individuals. The U.S.–Mexico War in 1848 and the subsequent 1853 Gadsden Purchase resulted in the U.S. adding Arizona territory (and other lands) from Mexico, and the granting of territorial status in 1864 further diversified Arizona. Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1877 contributed to the opening of mines and the development of agriculture, which attracted more migrants from throughout the U.S. and increased the U.S. Army presence to protect these Euro American settlers. In 1912 Arizona became the forty-eighth state.

For American Indian communities in this territory, the ongoing arrival of foreigners caused great turmoil, violence, and dispossession. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing until the turn of the twentieth century, conflict between new migrants and indigenous communities led to the latter's relocation to reservations. Two distinct communities—the Pima in the Gila Basin and the Maricopa from the Southern Colorado River—were coalesced by executive order into the Gila River Reservation. The Mohave and Chemehuevi, who lived in western Arizona along the

Colorado River, were moved in 1865 to a U.S. government–established reservation for Colorado River Indian tribes.

As the population increased so did Arizona's diversity. Anti-Asian sentiments and the resulting violence contributed to Chinese and Japanese Americans moving from California to the Southwest. African Americans settled initially as farmers, cowboys, and freighters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; cotton production attracted more migrants from the Cotton Belt. The swelling Japanese American (Nikkei) population at the twentieth century's dawning was due mainly to agricultural expansion in the Salt River Valley, which also experienced the concurrent migration of Mexicans from southern Arizona and Mexico's Sonoran region.

Settlement patterns, class distinctions, and institutional racism sparked interactions between Nikkei and African Americans, Mexican Americans, and American Indians. In the 1920s and 1930s shared socioeconomic status and occupation shaped the multiethnic neighborhoods of South Phoenix, where African Americans, Yaqui Indians, and Mexican Americans worked close by Chinese entrepreneurs and Japanese agriculturalists. In Tucson Mexicans and Yaqui Indians settled *Barrio Libre*, where Chinese capitalists and Euro American merchants and farmers also lived.

Arizona was not a primary destination for most mainland Japanese immigrants (Issei), who moved east of California for land, jobs, and opportunities. Some moved north from Mexico to Arizona. A demand for Japanese male laborers resulted from the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in 1882, at a time when the Southwest's need for mine and railroad workers peaked and agriculture emerged as a key industry. In Phoenix many Issei were agricultural workers; in Williams they were chiefly railroad workers.

By the turn of the century, more Japanese American families had settled in the Salt River Valley, where they often leased land and planted crops. Because

crops were trucked to the downtown Phoenix market, such small-scale agriculture was termed “truck farming.” Wives and daughters worked on the farm alongside men: women supervised the workers, sorted and washed produce, and packed crates for market in addition to performing domestic duties; they also often sold produce from stands on their farms. At the beginning of the twentieth century Glendale had the largest Nikkei community. There was also a community in South Phoenix near South Mountain as well as a smaller one in Mesa.

These families stimulated the growth of the valley’s Japanese American population, which led to a demand for rice and shoyu. While only a few Japanese farmers and merchants lived in Phoenix proper, most farmers drove their produce to the Phoenix market in the early morning to sell to grocers, and most families drove into the city for shopping, so a few Phoenix and Glendale businesses imported Japanese goods from Los Angeles for sale to the local population. After a U.S. boycott of Japanese goods in the 1930s, the Tadano family opened the nation’s first shoyu factory in Glendale.

Local community members also created a fabric of cultural institutions. H. O. Yamamoto and his wife founded the Phoenix area’s first Buddhist Church, located on their farm; in 1932 Reverend Hozen Seki held the first services in an empty building on their land. Four years later, the church moved to a building at 43<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and Indian School Road. Some members of the Nisei (U.S.-born citizens) generation can recall their parents carving the church’s original pews and altar from wood. Kiichi Sagawa, a Christian convert, began to conduct Sunday School classes on his property in Tolleson, eventually purchasing land for the Japanese Free Methodist Church, founded in Phoenix in 1932.

Transcending differences of faith, the community as a whole supported the Japanese-language schools established in Phoenix and Mesa: the Issei wanted

their children to learn how to speak Japanese and understand Japanese culture. Additionally, boys could attend martial arts classes in both Mesa and Phoenix, and after World War II girls could learn traditional dance from Janet Ikeda, who was trained in Japanese dance and had moved from Los Angeles to Mesa.

Along with other minority groups, Nikkei suffered institutional racism in many forms: state and federal legislation discriminated in the areas of immigration, citizenship, land ownership, and marriage. Immigrants of Asian descent could not become naturalized, and because the livelihood of most Arizona Nikkei revolved around agriculture, laws regulating land ownership of noncitizens significantly affected their ability to make a living. Alien land laws in the West commenced with California’s 1913 and 1920 statutes. Following suit in 1921, the Arizona legislature restricted land ownership to citizens, effectively prohibiting Issei from purchasing land. Japanese farmers subverted these restrictions by leasing land from Euro Americans or purchasing it in their citizen children’s names.

In 1865 Arizona’s territorial legislature passed its first law regulating interethnic marriage, which prohibited “Caucasians” from marrying African Americans and mulattoes. Subsequently the Arizona Supreme Court ruled that people of mixed Euro American ancestry could neither legally marry in Arizona nor—because they were not considered Euro American—challenge the statute’s constitutionality. This restriction extended to “Orientals,” thus further restricting marriage partners for Japanese.

Racially biased legislation concerning educational segregation also had a major impact on Arizona’s minority groups. In 1909 the territorial legislature endorsed the segregation of African American students, while the 1912 state constitution went further, mandating African American segregation at the elementary level and permitting it in high schools; though it was not required by statute, other ethnic

minorities were also placed in segregated schools. In 1925 *Romo v. Laird* in 1925 successfully challenged school segregation, a court victory that allowed Mexican Americans to attend the heretofore whites-only Tenth School in Tempe. Nonetheless, segregation continued statewide: for example, American Indian students were consigned to segregated boarding and reservation schools from 1925 to 1950.

The withholding of suffrage also effectively suppressed the rights of ethnic minorities. Not until 1924 did the federal government recognize American Indians as U.S. citizens, and they were not given voting rights until 1948. The Arizona legislature passed other statutes intended to restrict minorities' voting rights: a literacy test was imposed in 1912, which required all voters to read English; this requirement significantly affected Arizona's Spanish-speaking citizens. (The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 subsequently outlawed literacy tests as a requirement for voting.)

The pervasive institutional racism present in Arizona during the first half of the twentieth century was reflected on the urban landscape. In Phoenix African Americans were concentrated in select areas due to neighborhood covenants that prohibited home sales to African American buyers, while mortgage companies exacerbated the division by advancing credit only to families settling in specified neighborhoods. This type of *de facto* segregation also extended to Mexican Americans. Early Anglo settlers relegated Mexican residents to the most marginal land, and over time these communities became *barrios* with racially segregated schools and public facilities. Swimming pools, movie theaters, and drugstores excluded or separated African Americans, Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese, and any other group that city leaders and business owners deemed inferior.

The profound effects of World War II on Japanese in Arizona cannot be underestimated. The global power of Japan during the 1920s and 1930s previously had protected Japanese Americans, but that changed

with Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Not only did it precipitate war with the U.S., but it also had serious negative ramifications for the Nikkei (the majority of whom considered themselves to be "American," not "Japanese"). In February 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the removal of "designated persons" from delineated military zones in the western states. One such zone literally split the state of Arizona and its Japanese American community in two—a single street could determine which families would be "evacuated" into concentration camps and which could remain "free" outside the camps. Those removed were placed in Poston—the only "relocation center" administered by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs—on the Colorado River Indian Tribe (CRIT) reservation.

Just as California, Washington, and Oregon had "assembly centers" to hold people before the construction of camps managed by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), in southern Arizona Mayer Assembly Center (a former Civilian Conservation Camp (CCC) that had been only open one month) held evacuees until their transfer to Poston. Poston had three separate communities: Poston I, II, and III. Arizona's second WRA center, Rivers, was also on Indian land: located on the Gila River reservation, it consisted of the Butte and Canal camps. In addition to being the only state where the WRA sited relocation camps on Indian land, in 1943 Arizona also hosted an isolation center for "citizen troublemakers" at a former Indian boarding school in the town of Leupp located on Navajo land. Catalina Federal Honor Camp in Southern Arizona was a federal prison that held fewer than 50 draft resisters from the Poston, Granada (Colorado), and Topaz (Utah) WRA centers, including constitutional resister Gordon Hirabayashi. Together the Rivers and Poston camps held more than 30,000 Nikkei—this number was nearly one hundred times greater than Arizona's Japanese American community in 1940,

and far outnumbered the residents of the reservations housing them.

Both WRA camps provided the state with opportunities to prepare desert areas for agricultural cultivation: Poston inmates helped complete the Parker Dam to supply irrigation for farm lands, while local farmers hired Gila River inmates to pick cotton and do other field work. Other camp denizens were put to work manufacturing camouflage nets and other war-related items. Parents in Poston and Rivers also saw many of their sons serve the U.S. in World War II in the armed forces or the Military Intelligence Service (MIS).

While those Nikkei families in Glendale and Mesa living north and east of the “dividing line” remained free from detention, they did not escape the racist hostility directed at their ethnic community. Grocery and department stores would not serve them, and Japanese Americans could only enter Phoenix with a permit or if accompanied by a Euro American. Some families were forced to survive on what they farmed, and they also had to rely upon hired workers to represent them honestly when selling their produce at the Phoenix market. Some families who were not evacuated yet were adversely affected by forced exclusion successfully claimed reparations from the U.S. government in the 1990s.

The Arizona Japanese community played a significant role in assisting Japanese Americans who relocated to the state from California. After being released from confinement, these displaced Californians lived on the farms or in the homes of Japanese Arizonans, worked for them, and received temporary assistance from them to rebuild their lives. While most Japanese American inmates returned to California within a year or two, others remained and became members of Arizona’s post-World War II Japanese American community. In the 1950s the Gila River leadership agreed not to disturb the camp sites as long as they did not need to use the land, and they have honored this verbal commitment to the present day.

The growing politicization among ethnic minorities nationwide in the postwar era was also true among Japanese Americans in Arizona. Wing F. Ong became the first Asian American to be elected to a state office in 1946. Desegregation of high schools in Arizona began in 1949–1950. In 1951, the Arizona legislature amended the law mandating the segregation of African American students, leaving it to individual districts to desegregate as desired. In 1953, the Superior Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional. This ruling was followed on May 5, 1954, by a similar judgment just twelve days before the US Supreme Court handed down its *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict.

The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 (Immigration and Nationality Act) reversed the exclusion of Japanese-born individuals from U.S. citizenship; this legislation stopped racially based exclusions and established quotas based on national origin, enabling all immigrants from Asia to become citizens. Japanese Arizonans actively lobbied their state senators and representatives to support this bill. After the law passed, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) held citizenship classes in English and Japanese. Although not all Issei elected to be naturalized and not all Nikkei opted for JACL membership, the fact that Issei had a choice about whether or not to become citizens was a significant milestone for Japanese Americans. A Japanese American was also directly involved in overturning the Arizona statute that outlawed interracial marriage: in 1959 Judge Herbert F. Krucker overturned Arizona’s antimiscegenation law when he forced the Pima County clerk to recognize the marriage of Henry Oyama, a Japanese American, and Mary Ann Jordan, a Euro American, as well as the marriages of four other interracial couples.

The struggle for civil rights for all minority groups nationwide continued well into the 1960s. In Arizona, beginning in the late 1950s, a bill prohibiting racial discrimination in public places (public accommoda-

tions) was defeated several times in the legislature; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council responded with organized sit-ins starting in 1960. After increased protests, a public accommodation bill was finally passed in 1964. In 1963 more than a thousand protesters marched on Phoenix City Hall to demand a municipal commitment to equal employment. Attempts to establish a Martin Luther King Jr. state holiday began in 1972: in 1990 Arizona voters rejected the holiday, resulting in the state being taken out of the running to host the Super Bowl. In 1992 Arizona became the forty-ninth state to establish the King holiday, and the only one to do so after voter approval. Mexican Americans likewise protested discrimination: the nonprofit group Chicanos por la Causa was founded in 1969 to advocate for equal rights; high-school students boycotted Phoenix High School the following year because of discriminatory practices and high dropout rates. Debates continue today over immigration and immigrant rights. And American Indian communities in Arizona face continued challenges to their sovereignty in terms of resource management and economic development: for example, in 2006 the Navajo and Hopi nations settled a forty-year dispute over land that had resulted from partitioning by the federal government, and the success some Indian communities have had with gaming has resulted in repeated political initiatives to decrease tribal sovereignty by increasing taxes and regulating gaming in Arizona.

Beginning in the 1960s, as Arizona's Asian American community has become increasingly diversified, the Japanese American community has also changed. Reflecting national trends, Japanese Americans were the only Asian American subpopulation in Arizona to decrease in 2005, perhaps due to intermarriage and declining Japanese immigration. The number of Japanese farms has decreased as well due to global competition, their children choosing different career paths, and the premium on land in Maricopa Valley; by 2007

most Japanese Americans had sold their farmland to developers.

Nonetheless, the Japanese American community—particularly those involved with the JACL Arizona Chapter, the two primarily Nikkei congregations in Phoenix, the Tucson Japan America Society, and other civic and business organizations—maintains a strong cultural and community presence. In 2003 the JACL and Arizona State University's Asian Pacific American Studies program initiated the Japanese Americans in Arizona Oral History Project to document the community's history. The JACL Arizona Chapter hosted the 2006 National JACL Convention at Gila River, where a memorial to the inmates was dedicated at the Gila River Arts and Crafts Center; the Chapter also maintains a small display there about forced exclusion and Nisei soldiers. A memorial will be erected by the former Kishiyama farm to honor the Japanese American flower growers formerly located along Baseline Avenue in Phoenix. These growers' fields of flowers attracted tourists and dignitaries alike from the late 1950s to the 1980s

Innovative collaborations statewide continue to sustain Arizona's collective memory of internment. The Arizona Humanities Council sponsored the 1997 "Transforming Barbed Wire" conference, which examined the shared Japanese American and American Indian experiences at Gila River during World War II. *Gila River*, Lane Nishikawa's play about internment, was first performed by local Japanese Americans at the Arts and Crafts Center in 2000. In 1999 the Colorado River Indian Tribe (CRIT) designated 40 acres for a Poston educational site, and CRIT members worked with former inmates on the Poston Restoration Project in 2001 to rebuild Poston I and open a museum; in addition, the Poston Memorial Committee built a memorial at the camp site in 2002. OneBook Arizona—a statewide reading program—selected Cynthia Kadohata's novel *Weedflower*, about a friendship at Poston, for its 2007 children's book selection

The state of Arizona has increasingly recognized contributions by individual Japanese Americans. In 2003 the Tucson Unified School District dedicated Henry “Hank” Oyama Elementary School to honor Oyama’s educational leadership and his work in Mexican American bilingual education. Due to the efforts of Chandler resident Bill Staples, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano declared November 10, 2005, to be “Kenichi Zenimura Day” to commemorate the legendary Japanese American baseball player who, as a Gila River inmate, constructed a field and organized a camp baseball league; in 1945 he coached the Gila River Eagles to victory over Arizona’s top high school team, the Tucson Badgers, at Butte Camp. In 2006 surviving members of both teams reunited and recalled how Zenimura and the Badgers’ coach, Hank Slagle, transcended racial differences in the name of sportsmanship.

Arizona has experienced rapid population growth in the past few decades, one benefit of which is increased diversity. Recently, for example, the state has welcomed refugees from Burma and Sudan. Today the state’s challenge is how to respond to changes brought about by this increased diversity, including spiraling demands for resources and the need to ensure equal access to services and opportunities while encouraging and sustaining the democratic engagement of all of its residents.

# Timeline for Japanese Americans in Arizona

(Compiled by Karen J. Leong)

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- 1865** • Arizona Territorial Legislature passes law prohibiting Euro Americans from marrying African Americans or mulattoes
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- 1870** • U.S. Census begins to count persons of Japanese descent
- 1877** • Antimiscegenation law revised to forbid intermarriage between Euro Americans and American Indians
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- 1882** • First Chinese Exclusion law passed, forbidding entry of Chinese laborers; extended indefinitely in 1904 and repealed in 1943, this results in recruitment of Japanese labor to the United States and Hawai'i
- 1885** • Japanese immigrant Hachiro Onuki comes to Arizona and changes name to Hutcheon Ohnick; Ohnick becomes a naturalized U.S. citizen and partner in the first electricity and gas plant in Phoenix He marries Catherine Shannon in 1888
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- 1897** • Japanese agricultural workers hired in central Arizona territory
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- 1900** • U.S. Census counts 281 Japanese in Arizona Territory
- 1905** • 120 Japanese laborers are brought to Salt River Valley to work on sugar beet farm
- Japan defeats Russia in Russo-Japanese War
- 1906** • First Japanese settles permanently in Maricopa County
- 1907** • President Theodore Roosevelt brokers so-called Gentlemen's Agreement with prime minister of Japan to halt migration of Japanese workers to the United States; Japanese migration for family reunification still permitted
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- 1909** • Japanese workers for hire advertised in Prescott newspaper
- Increasing numbers of Japanese truck farmers thrive in central Arizona, growing cantaloupe, sugar beets, lettuce, and strawberries
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- 1910** • U.S. Census counts 371 Japanese in Arizona Territory
- Arizona Japanese Association founded
- Free Methodist Church and People's Mission in Mesa work with Japanese in Salt River Valley
- 1912** • Arizona and New Mexico gain statehood
- 1913** • Arizona passes first alien land law, following California's lead
- 1917** • Editorial in Mesa Daily Tribune praises patriotism of Japanese in Red Cross activities supporting local troops
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- 1920** • U.S. Census counts 550 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1921** • Arizona passes a stricter alien land law
- 1929** • Mr. and Mrs. Kiichi Sagawa initiate first Japanese Protestant Christian meetings
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- 1930** • U.S. Census counts 879 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1932** • Japanese Free Methodist Church dedicated
- 1933** • Reverend Hozen Seki arrives to lead Buddhist Church at H.O. Yamamoto farm
- 1934** • Euro American farmers, discontented with poor economy, begin an anti-alien movement intended to force all Asians out of Arizona; 10 Japanese farmers are assaulted
- 1935** • Japanese Consul's intervention with federal government halts violence, but acreage farmed by Japanese drops from 8,000 acres to 3,000
- 1936** • Arizona Buddhist Church building in Phoenix opens

## Timeline for Japanese Americans in Arizona

- 1940 • U.S. Census counts 632 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1941 • The day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, FBI agents visit several Japanese American families in Arizona, taking away heads of households and community leaders
- 1942 • General John DeWitt sets up military zones along the West Coast; the dividing line demarcates the southern third of Arizona as restricted and also splits Maricopa County in half between restricted and free zones
- Mayer Assembly Center opens for one month
  - Concentration camps constructed at Gila River Reservation and Colorado River Indian Tribes Reservation
- 1945 • Rivers and Canal camps at Gila River closed
- Poston I, II, and III camps in Parker closed
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- 1950 • U.S. Census counts 780 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1952 • Congress passes McCarran-Walter Act, which revises U.S. immigration law and gives Japanese-born immigrants the right to naturalized citizenship
- 1956 • More than 40 Arizona Issei become naturalized citizens
- 1957 • Original Buddhist Church building destroyed in arson fire
- 1959 • Hank Oyama and his bride Mary Ann Jordan, along with four other couples, successfully challenge Arizona's anti-miscegenation law
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- 1960 • U.S. Census counts 1,501 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1961 • New Buddhist Church building dedicated
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- 1970 • U.S. Census counts 2,394 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1976 • City of Phoenix becomes a Sister City with Himeji in Japan
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- 1980 • U.S. Census counts 4,074 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1984 • City of Phoenix (along with the Japan-America Society of Phoenix, the Japanese American Citizens League Arizona chapter, Himeji Sister Cities Committee, Arizona Buddhist Church, and Phoenix Japanese Free Methodist Church) organizes Matsuri: A Festival of Japan
- 1986 • Phoenix and Himeji, Japan, begin collaborating on plans for a Japanese Friendship Garden in Margaret T. Hance Park in Phoenix
- 1988 • President Ronald Reagan signs Civil Liberties Act
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- 1990 • U.S. Census counts 6,302 Japanese Americans in Arizona
- 1996 • Japanese Tea House and Tea House Garden in Phoenix open
- 1997 • "Transforming Barbed Wire," an Arizona Humanities Council-funded project, explores the incarceration of Japanese Americans on American Indian lands in Arizona; project includes commissioned artwork, a scholarly publication, educational activities, and tours of both Poston and Gila River sites
- 1999 • Colorado River Indian Tribes designates 40 acres for Poston educational site
- Japanese Friendship Garden in Phoenix dedicated by Himeji and Phoenix officials
  - Premiere of Lane Nishikawa's play Gila River at Gila River Arts and Crafts Center
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- 2000 • U.S. Census counts 7,712 Japanese Americans in Arizona





## Timeline for Japanese Americans in Arizona

- 2002 • Poston Memorial Committee dedicates memorial at former concentration camp site
- 2003 • Japanese Americans in Arizona Oral History Project begins with grant from Arizona Humanities Council
  - Dedication of Henry “Hank” Oyama Elementary School in Tucson Unified School District
  - World War II Military Intelligence Service Veteran Masaji Inoshita of Glendale inducted into Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame
- 2005 • American Community Survey counts 7,214 Japanese Americans in Arizona
  - Mesa Arts Center opens, featuring the 1,588-seat Tom and Janet Ikeda Theater
  - Arizona governor Janet Napolitano declares November 10 “Kenichi Zenimura Day” for the Japanese American baseball player who organized the camp’s baseball league
- 2006 • JACL Arizona hosts JACL National Convention at Gila River
  - Arizona Historical Foundation creates “A Celebration of the Human Spirit: Japanese-American Relocation Camps in Arizona,” a temporary exhibit at Arizona State University Hayden Library
- JACL Arizona dedicates a memorial to the Gila River concentration camps at Gila River Arts and Crafts Center
- Pima County Sports Hall of Fame, Nisei Baseball Research Project, and Tucson High School recognize the Gila River Butte Eagles and the Tucson High Badgers, as well as the cooperation of their coaches—Kenichi Zenimura and Hank Slagle—at “Hall of Fame Night”; in 1945 the Gila River League champion Eagles defeated three-time state champion Badgers at Gila River concentration camp by one run in ten innings of play
- 2007 • Cynthia Kadohata’s novel *Weedflower*, about a friendship between a Mojave Indian and a Japanese American at Poston during World War II, is the juvenile category selection for OneBook Arizona