

Japanese Americans in Colorado

Daryl J. Maeda

Japanese Americans have a long and complex history in Colorado, and their story features struggles and perseverance, discrimination and tolerance. Exploring this history from the 1880s to the present enables us to learn about race and racism, civil liberties, and the responsibilities of individuals in a diverse and democratic society. Colorado is notable among U.S. states to the degree that 1) it boasted thriving Japanese American communities before World War II; 2) during the war it was the site of an concentration camp; 3) it served as a major resettlement center for exiles from the West Coast; 4) it housed a major military Japanese-language school; and 5) it was home to an independent and principled ethnic press during the war.

The earliest Japanese to arrive in Colorado probably did so between 1886 and 1888 and were mainly visitors and students. They were followed shortly, however, by the first large wave of Japanese immigrants moving eastward from the Pacific Coast. The largest number of Japanese came to Colorado between 1903 and 1908 and worked as common laborers, railroad workers, miners, farmhands, factory workers, and domestics. The influx boosted the Japanese population of the state from 48 in 1900 to 2,300 in 1910.

Many Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants) initially worked in Colorado on the railroad and in the coal mines. These early settlers entered an environment already structured by anti-Asian sentiments, evidenced when a mob ransacked and burned the Chinese section of Denver in 1880. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act barred the immigration of Chinese laborers to the U.S., and as the Chinese population of Colorado subsequently waned, the Japanese population grew. Like the Chinese before them, the Japanese who came to Colorado were scorned as the “yellow peril,” subjected to violence, and excluded from union membership. The Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Post ran anti-Japanese stories and

editorials beginning in 1901, and by 1908 the Colorado State Federation of Labor had formed a Japanese and Korean Exclusion League.

As Colorado’s agricultural industry blossomed in the early 1900s, farming and farm labor became a mainstay of the ethnic economy of Japanese Americans. Beginning around 1902, Japanese Americans found work in agriculture, with many eventually becoming independent farmers in the Arkansas Valley—where they pioneered the famous Rocky Ford melons—as well as in the San Luis Valley and in western Colorado near Grand Junction and Delta; farming communities also sprang up around Denver in Brighton, Fort Lupton, and Greeley. By 1909 an estimated 3,000 Japanese Americans worked the fields of Colorado. Many of them were laborers on sugar beet farms to the north and east of Denver, making up one-sixth of the sugar beet workforce.

By 1940 Colorado’s Japanese American community population had grown to 2,734. Most lived in rural farming communities, but more than 800 Nisei called the greater Denver area home. In Denver proper, a so-called Little Tokyo, nestled between 18th and 23rd Streets on Larimer, contained restaurants, Asian merchandise stores, small businesses, a laundry, barber shops, and several hotels. It was situated in an impoverished section of town surrounded by pawnshops, secondhand clothing stores, flophouses, missions, saloons, and cheap hotels—and Japanese Americans tended to live among Mexican Americans, African Americans, and assorted immigrant groups.

On the eve of World War II, more than two-thirds of the people of Japanese descent in Colorado were Nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans, who were native-born citizens of the United States—while the remaining one-third were Issei. This ratio mirrored the Issei/Nisei composition of the rest of the nation. The outbreak of World War II fundamentally altered Japanese Colorado by greatly increasing the so-called free Japanese population and by adding thousands of



people imprisoned in Amache, a concentration camp. For a brief period after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, Japanese Americans could “voluntarily” relocate from the West Coast, and a number headed for Colorado. In the face of widespread anti-Japanese sentiment, Governor Ralph L. Carr welcomed Japanese Americans, stating, “They are as loyal to American institutions as you and I.” Later, when the War Relocation Authority (WRA) attempted to enlist the assistance of governors of western states in relocating and resettling Japanese Americans, Carr stood alone in his willingness to cooperate. Because of his principles, he was excoriated as a “Jap lover” by his political rival, Edwin “Big Ed” Johnson, who instead proposed that the National Guard be called out to close the state borders to Japanese—indeed, Johnson had used the Guard to interdict Mexicans when he was governor. Carr was closely defeated by Johnson in the 1942 race for the U.S. Senate, arguably because of his tolerant and democratic stance, but Japanese Americans never forgot his welcome—he was memorialized most notably with a bronze bust in Denver’s Sakura Square in 1976.

One observer noted, “During the early war period, Denver was a ‘Mecca’ for evacuees not desiring to go further eastward, as well as a stop-over for those who eventually continued their journey.” Denver’s Japanese American population exploded, from 323 in 1940 to a high of approximately 5,000 in late 1945. Indeed, for a time Denver was considered the “unofficial Japanese capital of the United States,” a title usurped by Chicago during the later war years. The number of Japanese American businesses increased from 46 in 1940 to 258 in 1946. They continued to be concentrated in the Larimer district, hemmed in by pressure to restrict Japanese Americans from other sections of the city. Most of these businesses catered to a mixed clientele of Mexicans, Japanese, Euro Americans, and a few African Americans. The growth of the rural population of Japanese Americans mirrored that of

Denver’s, increasing from about 2,300 before the war to between 6,000 and 7,000.

The removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast which fueled the growth of the free population of Colorado also led to the imprisonment of more than 7,500 people at the Granada Relocation Center, nicknamed Camp Amache for its postal designation, “Amache.” Located in the arid plains of southeastern part of Colorado, near the tiny town of Granada and about eighteen miles east of the larger town of Lamar, Amache was the smallest of the 10 concentration camps in the U.S. The residents, most of whom hailed from southern California and the San Joaquin Valley in central California, were unprepared for the brutal weather that greeted them. Hot, dry summers that swept dust storms across the parched camp were followed by bone-chilling winters during which wind and snow blew through the cracks in barracks walls. One of the most eminent prisoners at Amache was Yamato Ichihashi, an Issei history professor at Stanford University, who had published a landmark study of Japanese Americans in 1932. Initially imprisoned in California at Santa Anita and Tule Lake before being sent to Amache, Ichihashi wrote extensive notes and correspondence on his confinement experience, an experience that unfortunately left him but a shadow of his prewar self. Pat Suzuki, a Nisei who later went on to win fame as a singer and Broadway star, was another notable Amachean.

Prisoners operated an extensive agricultural enterprise at Amache which included more than 500 acres of vegetable crops and more than 2,000 acres of field crops, along with cattle, hogs, and poultry. Other prisoners worked in a silk-screening unit that produced recruiting posters for the Army and Navy. The Granada Pioneer, a semiweekly newspaper published by the inmates which was subject to censorship by the camp administration, provided an important source of information about life in camp. Japanese Americans who visited the towns of Granada and Lamar on

weekend shopping passes reported reactions ranging from warm welcomes to “No Japs Allowed” signs posted in storefronts. The military service controversy that wracked other camps was more muted at Amache, though the camp produced both volunteers and inductees—along with draft resisters—in significant proportions. Some 953 Amacheans served in the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT), in the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), and in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC); 31 of them were killed during the war. While Amache produced a higher percentage of military participants than any other camp, 34 of the Nisei drafted out of Amache refused to comply, also a high percentage.

Colorado had historically supported several Japanese-language newspapers. During the war two of them, the *Colorado Times* and the *Rocky Nippon* (later renamed the *Rocky Shimpō*), were issued bilingually in Japanese and English and enjoyed their highest circulations ever. James “Jimmie” Omura, a journalist who relocated from San Francisco to Denver after Japanese Americans were evicted from California, became the English-language editor of the triweekly *Rocky Shimpō*, which during the war years called itself the “largest circulated Nisei vernacular in the continental U.S.A.” In the pages of that publication, Omura carried on what one historian has called “arguably the most courageous and significant Nikkei journalist writing ever produced.” The issue being examined and discussed was whether Japanese Americans should participate in military service while their civil rights were being violated. The JACL and its supporters, who advocated that Japanese Americans volunteer for military service, lobbied to have the draft imposed on men in the camps. Omura, however, believed that Japanese Americans should not be required to risk their lives for the nation until their constitutional rights were restored. When a group of draft resisters of conscience called the Fair Play Committee organized at the Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming,

Omura published editorials endorsing their position. For his troubles he was tried for conspiracy to violate the Selective Service Act but was acquitted.

Beyond simply being evicted and imprisoned, Japanese Americans made vital contributions to the war effort in Colorado. Japanese Americans released on seasonal passes performed much-needed labor on farms across the state, proving particularly invaluable on sugar beet farms, where backbreaking manual labor was required. More than 150 Issei, Nisei, and Kibei (Japanese Americans born in the U.S. but educated in Japan), many of them recruited from concentration camps, served as instructors at the Navy Japanese Language School, which operated from June 1942 to 1946 on the campus of the University of Colorado at Boulder. Their pupils went on to play key roles in the Pacific theater of operations as interpreters, interrogators, and propagandists during the war and subsequent occupation; many, including Donald Keene and Edward Seidensticker (a native Coloradan), later went on to become influential scholars of Japanese language, literature, and history.

The Japanese American population of Colorado peaked in 1945 at about 11,700, but this number fell precipitously as restrictions were lifted on the West Coast: in the next year approximately 5,500 returned home, and by 1950 only 5,412 Japanese Americans remained in the state. Despite the out-migration, however, Colorado continues to host vibrant Japanese communities, both urban and rural. According to the 2000 census, there were 11,571 Japanese Americans in Colorado, but this number counted only monoracial people, while the community is increasingly multiracial. Including multiracial (hapa) Japanese Americans, the population probably tops 18,000.

Japanese Americans are clustered overwhelmingly along the Front Range, from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs, primarily in the greater Denver metro area; strong communities and organizations also persist in smaller places such as Fort Lupton and Brighton,

the home of Sakata Farms, one of the largest farms in the Southwest. One thing that has changed dramatically since 1965 is that Japanese Americans, once the predominant Asian ethnic group in Colorado, now trail South Asians, Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese, although they still outnumber Filipinos. Students can study Asian American history and culture in ethnic studies programs and departments at University of Colorado campuses in Boulder, Denver, and Colorado Springs and at Colorado State University.

Colorado has been home to several nationally prominent Japanese Americans. Min Yasui was an attorney who first gained fame for defying curfew orders in 1942, and in the postwar years he became a respected civic leader in Denver for his efforts to promote interracial harmony. During the 1980s he sought to overturn his wartime conviction and was a national leader in the movement for redress and reparations. A city and county of Denver building is named after him, and the Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award is given out annually in his honor. Bill Hosokawa, the dean of Japanese American journalists,

worked at the Denver Post from 1946 to 1984 as a war correspondent, columnist, and finally editor of the editorial page; he also wrote a nationally read column in the Pacific Citizen and has published a dozen books over the last half century, including his notable 2005 volume, *Colorado's Japanese Americans: From 1886 to the Present*.

Although Japanese Coloradans are geographically, economically, and socially integrated into mainstream society, they maintain strong ethnic ties through organizations, institutions, and events and celebrations. Sakura Square in Denver continues to be a significant gathering place for Japanese Americans today. Community institutions, such as the Tri-State/Denver Buddhist Temple and the Pacific Mercantile grocery store, are located in the Square, which also hosts the Cherry Blossom Festival each year. The Japanese American community in Colorado continues to thrive as it moves forward in the twenty-first century.

Timeline for Japanese Americans in Colorado

(Compiled by Daryl J. Maeda)

-
- 1886** • Tadaatsu Matsudaira is first Japanese to arrive in Colorado
-
- 1903** • Large-scale Japanese immigration to Colorado begins
- 1907** • Japanese Association of Colorado established
- Worship services held among Japanese Americans in Denver; this later leads to establishment of Simpson United Methodist Church, a principal institution of the community today
- 1908** • Japanese Association of Brighton, Fort Lupton, and Platteville formed
-
- 1916** • Tri-State Buddhist Temples formed. Today, the Tri-State/Denver Buddhist Temple in Sakura Square is a central organization among Japanese Americans
-
- 1938** • Mile-Hi chapter of Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) is established in Denver
-
- 1942** • Some Japanese Americans (perhaps a thousand) “voluntarily” migrate from the West Coast to Colorado before “voluntary evacuation” was banned.
- Colorado’s Japanese American population begins to swell and continues to grow throughout the war through resettlement
 - Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr, bucking prevailing anti-Japanese sentiment, welcomes Japanese Americans to his state, stating, “They are loyal Americans.”
 - The 10,500-acre Granada Relocation Center, nicknamed “Camp Amache,” opens in the Arkansas River Valley of eastern Colorado; more than 7,500 people were incarcerated there. Thirty-one Japanese American soldiers from Amache die fighting in World War II, with thirty-four resisting the draft
- 1944** • James Omura writes editorials in the Denver-based Rocky Shimpō urging draft resisters at Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming to stand firm in demanding that their civil liberties be restored before they submitted to the draft; he was tried for conspiracy to evade the draft but acquitted on First Amendment grounds
- 1945** • Camp Amache closes
- 1946** • Bill Hosokawa joins the Denver Post. He went on to serve as editor of its Opinion Page
-
- 1961** • Influential Nisei journalist Larry Tajiri dies. Tajiri was the editor of the JACL’s newspaper, Pacific Citizen, during the war, then served as art and literary critic for the Denver Post from 1952 until his death. He is commemorated in Denver by the Larry Tajiri Memorial Award for Outstanding Accomplishment in the Performing Arts
-
- 1973** • Tamai Tower and Sakura Square in Denver are dedicated
- 1976** • Bust of Governor Carr is placed in Sakura Square to commemorate his support for Japanese Americans during WWII
- Denver Taiko is established, the fourth taiko group to be formed in North America and the first outside of California
 - City of Denver establishes the Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award to honor this community leader, political activist, and civil rights advocate who worked closely with African Americans, Latinos, and Euro Americans as Executive Director of the Commission on Community Relations
- 1977** • Naoichi “Harry” Hokusano, a turn-of-the-century labor contractor, is honored with a portrait in a stained-glass window at the State Capitol in Denver

- 1983 • Min Yasui challenges his wartime conviction for violating curfew orders in Portland. His is one of three landmark “coram nobis” cases alleging government misconduct in the original trials. Although Yasui died before his case could be decided, the other two litigants, Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu, had their convictions set aside
-
- 2007 • Bill Hosokawa honored with Civil Rights Award from Anti-Defamation League, Mountain States Regional Office