

Japanese Americans in New Mexico

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New Mexicans have been celebrating their racial and cultural diversity long before most other Americans. Comprising Native Americans, Latinos, and Euro Americans, the New Mexico mosaic, often described as a “tricultural society,” is actually much more complex. This part of the Southwest is the ancestral homeland of a variety of Indian people, including the Pueblo, Navajo, Apache, and Comanche. More than four hundred years ago it became the northern frontier of Spain’s vast empire and was settled by people representing Spanish, Indian, African, and mixed bloodlines. The “conquest” of the Southwest by Americans in the 1800s brought new multitudes to the territory’s military forts, supply stations, railroads, mines, boomtowns, ranches, and homesteads; the majority were “European Americans” (with ancestral roots in various parts of Europe), but many African Americans, Chinese, and Mexicans also came to explore opportunities. While this great mixing of humanity certainly spawned some epic conflicts, from the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 through the wars against the Navajo and Apache in the late 1800s, on the whole New Mexico has earned its reputation as a place where diversity rules and racists fair poorly.

This tolerant landscape provides a unique backdrop for studying Japanese Americans in the West. On the surface at least, Japanese Americans, or Nikkei, seemed to gain little ground in New Mexico until World War II. Few came to settle in the state, and no more than 300 Nikkei were counted by census-takers between 1900 and 1950. Despite the small number of Nikkei living there, New Mexico joined other states in passing an alien land law, and the state supported anti-Japanese immigration restrictions in the 1920s. During World War II two major Japanese internment camps were located in New Mexico. That said, the low settlement figures closely resemble those of Nevada, Arizona, Wyoming, and Texas. If prejudice had its

effects, it seems that no sizable anti-Japanese movement ever existed here. As for New Mexico’s reaction to the World War II “Japanese question,” it was decidedly mixed, molded in part by New Mexican influences but largely by federal intervention.

Japanese immigrants, the Issei, were slow to discover New Mexico: in 1900 the U.S. Census counted only eight, but the figure had increased to 250 by 1910. Lured mainly by coal-mining jobs, hundreds of Issei passed through New Mexico in that decade. Most worked in the mines around Gallup, Madrid, and Raton. Other Japanese contract workers harvested sugar beets in some of the valleys north of Santa Fe. These crews of recent immigrants came via Japanese labor contractors based elsewhere but were supervised locally by a Japanese “boss” such as Masatomo Nakaniishi (who reportedly managed 300 Japanese coal miners in the Albuquerque-Madrid region in these early days).

Throughout the second decade of the twentieth century, some Japanese men found permanent work in the mines and on the railroads of New Mexico, and a few moved into farming. A handful of Japanese women also arrived and married, becoming the cornerstones of a number of small family-based communities that dotted the New Mexico map by 1920; these pioneer couples gave birth to a Nisei generation that would soon outnumber Issei in the state.

Powerful forces worked against Japanese settlers in the West, with federal immigration laws and alien land laws in particular stifling ambitions in New Mexico. The earliest rumblings of these California-based exclusion campaigns were not felt in the territory, which was struggling toward statehood in 1912 (although New Mexico’s “sister state,” Arizona, passed its first land law a year later). New Mexico joined those pushing for exclusion in 1921 when the state legislature amended the Constitution to bar “alien” (meaning Japanese) individuals or partnerships from acquiring “title, leasehold, or other interest in or to real estate in New Mexico.” Republican Governor Mer-



ritt C. Mechem had received a mass of anti-Japanese propaganda and instruction from the V. S. McClatchy, editor of the Sacramento Bee, and he pushed his lawmakers to act. New Mexican voters approved the amendment, but how “homegrown” the anti-Japanese sentiment involved in that action involved is not clear.

Only a few Japanese families had acquired New Mexico farmland prior to 1920—lands were tied up in old Spanish/Mexican land grants and Indian reservations, there were homesteading restrictions, and available lands were often in marginal condition, so it is not difficult to understand why this was the case. A dozen or so Japanese farmers did help to pioneer agriculture in the still underdeveloped Mesilla and Las Cruces districts. They arrived in the late teens to plant traditional crops such as wheat, corn, beans, and sugar beets, but tenacious and willing to experiment, they soon began growing various so-called truck crops, including cantaloupes, onions, cabbage, peas, and tomatoes. The Tashiro and Nakayama families built thriving operations that survived a general shutdown of farms during the Great Depression, and their business expanded well into the 1950s. Roy M. Nakayama, a Nisei member of the family, earned a doctorate in agricultural science, taught and did fieldwork for New Mexico State University, and developed the important NuMex Big Jim variety of green chile, as well as the Nakayama Scale, which measures the hotness of chiles. A few others, including the Togami, Yonemoto, Ebina, and Mizunuma families, migrated into New Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s to lease land and farm around Bluewater, Grants, and Albuquerque.

Despite the success of some Japanese in agricultural enterprises, in the prewar decades, railroad work sustained a majority of Nikkei families. The Santa Fe Railway alone employed scores of Japanese trackmen and craft workers in its repair shops. Western railroads also favored Japanese section foremen to supervise track maintenance crews of mixed ethnicity during this period. The onset of World War II threatened

to erase these modest inroads made by the Japanese in New Mexico. Most vulnerable were the railroad workers and their families living on or near the nation’s vital transportation/communication systems. In the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Department of Justice sent confused signals as to whether Japanese nationals could continue working. The Santa Fe Railway and some other railroads pulled Japanese employees off their jobs within days, ultimately terminating them and “excluding” them from company homes and property.

This development caused extreme hardship for a significant number of Japanese New Mexicans. The worst effects were felt in Clovis, where about 30 Japanese Americans lived under house arrest for a month before being “evacuated” from Clovis to an abandoned and isolated Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Lincoln County. Local factors, such as physical and cultural isolation, resentment over seniority rights, and Clovis’s proximity to “Little Texas” (oil fields located at the eastern and southern fringes of the state), contributed to this tragedy.

Elsewhere, however, the state’s trademark tolerance seemed to prevail. The Japanese families of Gallup received especially kind treatment from local residents and officials, who reportedly banned together and signed a petition to resist any efforts to intern the local Japanese, and incredibly, Gallup High School students elected two Nisei students as senior class presidents during the war. Most eligible Nisei sons of the state served with the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT). By luck or design, the devastating line of exclusion that wrecked so many Japanese and Japanese American lives on the West Coast and in Arizona stopped abruptly at the New Mexico border. Still, between lost railroad wages, confiscated property, and a variety of newly instituted restrictions, the Nikkei of New Mexico suffered considerably.

Newspapers and other period documents testify to increased anti-Japanese wartime sentiment in the

state. A great many New Mexicans stationed in the Philippines suffered through the Bataan Death March and experienced years of abuse in Japanese prison camps, which generated misplaced fears, anger, and lingering frustration. Racial hatred also surfaced over a plan—which failed—to establish farming colonies in New Mexico that would accommodate tens of thousands of Japanese Americans being forcibly expelled from the West Coast. Federal authorities did build two large internment camps in New Mexico on the outskirts of Santa Fe and Lordsburg.

Unlike the larger mass concentration camps in other states established by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the official internment camps were creations of the Department of Justice, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the Army. Roughly 800 Issei “enemy aliens,” arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other authorities during the early part of the war, arrived at the Santa Fe camp in May of 1942. By the following summer, the INS-administered Santa Fe facility housed close to 1,900 people; the Lordsburg camp held about 600 internees by then, who were guarded by Army Military Police units. The prisoners held in Santa Fe and Lordsburg represented the economic, intellectual, and creative elite of the Japanese American community: businessmen, writers, editors, artists, teachers, former military officers, and community leaders.

The government treated the internees like prisoners of war and basically ran the camps according to the rules of the Geneva Convention. Living conditions were crude. Although relatively few problems seem to have occurred, the history of the Lordsburg camp was punctuated by the shooting deaths of two weak and aged Issei in 1942 who were alleged to be trying to escape. In addition, a brief riot disrupted camp operations in Santa Fe for a time in 1945, a situation that stemmed from the importation to the camp of more than 350 men who had been identified as “trouble-

makers” and removed from the Tule Lake Segregation Center in California. A handful of Kibei (American-born Nisei educated in Japan) in the Tule Lake group began to engage in pro-Japan activities and in the process intimidate some of the peaceful Issei internees, prompting a minor revolt and crackdown by authorities. These men—and others identified as troublemakers from various camps—were subsequently sent either to Lordsburg or to another segregation facility known as “the stinker camp,” located at Fort Stanton in Lincoln County.

Overarching federal decisions such as those to summarily dismiss Nikkei railroaders and to place internment camps in the state magnify New Mexico’s role in a larger narrative. The Bataan saga and the building here of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan created other uncomfortable links between New Mexico and Japan in the war years. Conversely, the modest increase in the so-called free Japanese American population of New Mexico during and just after the war points to another side of a complex legacy.

From the 1940s to the present, Japanese Americans have made many important contributions to the fabled multicultural landscape of New Mexico. Noteworthy individuals have made significant impacts in the areas of agriculture and education, art and architecture, military service and civic affairs, including Nakayama’s development of the beloved Big Jim Chile; the Monastery of Christ in the Desert near Abiquiu, designed by famed architect and woodworker George Nakashima; and the Miyamura Veterans Park and I-40 overpass in Gallup named after Hiroshi “Hershey” Miyamura, recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor for his feats of bravery during the Korean War. The importance of Japanese Americans is also reflected in the work of postwar arrivals such as Satoye “Ruth” Hashimoto, who settled here in the early 1950s. Among other honors stemming from her work on behalf of the United Nations Association, the United Nations Children’s Fund, Sister Cities Inter-

national, and Japanese American Redress, Hashimoto was invited to the White House for the signing of the Civil Liberties Act in 1988. She has since received the Living Treasure of New Mexico Award, the Woman of the Twentieth Century Award, the Japanese Emperor's Medal, and induction into the New Mexico Women's Hall of Fame.

This enduring legacy is also reflected in a wide variety of Japanese American clubs, businesses, and annual celebrations which endure in this Land of Enchantment. While it has remained rather small in membership, the Albuquerque-based New Mexico chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), which dates back to 1946, hosts the annual Aki Matsuri Celebration. Links between the Sister Cities of Albuquerque and Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture, were forged in 1966 and remain strong. Numerous Japanese restaurants can be found in the state's larger cities, as well as clubs dedicated to teaching and preserving Japanese martial arts, bonsai, flower arranging, and taiko drumming. Albuquerque is home to the Kyokai Buddhist Community association, and several Zen centers dot the state map as well. These organizations, businesses, and events are rather amazing

reflections of cultural persistence, given that the 2000 U.S. census counted only 1,593 Japanese Americans living in New Mexico.

Another benchmark was achieved in 2006 when New Mexicans voted to amend the state's constitution to remove the obsolete anti-Japanese land law. As we celebrate this achievement, we should also ask why New Mexico lagged so far behind other states in taking this step (and why the same ballot question had failed just a few elections back). We should reflect as well on the uproar and anti-Japanese sentiments that surfaced in 1999 over plans to establish a modest historical marker near the site of the Santa Fe internment camp (the marker was placed in 2002).

Like so many ethnic groups, Japanese Americans have become an integral part of the diversity that is New Mexico, but the sum of their experiences reflects a mixed legacy of tolerance and intolerance, successes and setbacks, and long-term contributions and accomplishments, none of which have been fully explored. Indeed, a wide audience can profit from further study into the peculiar history of the Nikkei in New Mexico, a history still being written today.



Timeline for Japanese Americans in New Mexico

(Compiled by Andrew B. Russell)

- 1900 • U.S. Census counts eight Japanese in the New Mexico Territory
- 1907 • So-called Gentlemen's Agreement greatly reduces Japanese immigration

- 1910 • U.S. Census counts 250 Japanese in New Mexico Territory
- 1912 • New Mexico and Arizona gain statehood
- 1913 • California and Arizona pass tough anti-Japanese alien land laws
- 1915 • Number of Japanese women arriving in New Mexico begins to grow
- 1918 • Japanese farmers settle in Doña Ana County

- 1921 • New Mexico adds anti-alien land law amendment to state constitution
- 1922 • Ten Japanese railroad workers in Clovis work through major shop strike

- 1930 • U.S. Census counts 249 Japanese Americans in New Mexico

- 1940 • U.S. Census counts 186 Japanese Americans in New Mexico (72 Issei; 114 Nisei)
- 1941 • Japanese workers dismissed from Santa Fe Railway
- 1942 • Workers in Clovis and their families removed to Baca Ranch camp, Lincoln County
 - Santa Fe and Lordsburg internment camps established; two Japanese internees later killed at Lordsburg camp
- General John DeWitt sets up military zones along the West Coast; Western evacuation zone ends at New Mexico border
- News of horrors of Bataan Death March reaches New Mexico

- 1945 • Small "riot" occurs at the Santa Fe internment camp
 - Atomic bombs, built in New Mexico, are dropped on Japan, ending World War II

- 1946 • New Mexico chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) is established

- 1950 • U.S. Census counts 251 Japanese Americans in New Mexico
- 1953 • New Mexican Hiroshi H. Miyamura is awarded Congressional Medal of Honor

- 1966 • Albuquerque (USA) and Sasebo (Japan) become Sister Cities

- 1988 • President Ronald Reagan signs Civil Liberties Act, in which the U.S. government officially apologized for incarcerating Japanese Americans and authorized monetary reparations
- 1989 • Satoye "Ruth" Hashimoto is inducted into New Mexico Women's Hall of Fame
- 1998 • Department of Justice extends redress to victims of railroad/mine firings
- 1999 • Opposition surfaces over plan to establish Santa Fe camp historic marker

- 2000 • U.S. Census counts 1,593 Japanese Americans in New Mexico

Timeline for Japanese Americans in New Mexico

- 2002 • Santa Fe Internment Camp marker is placed at Frank S. Ortiz Park
- 2006 • Gallup Veterans Park is dedicated to Hiroshi “Hershey” Miyamura
- New Mexico repeals its anti-alien land law