

# Japanese Americans in Texas

## Thomas Walls

Texas is a large state with a diverse population. Although Texans of Japanese ancestry have never been large in number, they have nonetheless made big contributions throughout their unique history. The first significant impact was in the early 1900s, when Japanese initiated at least 30 large-scale attempts to grow rice on the southeast coastal plains around Houston and Beaumont. Following a 1902 fact-finding visit by Sadatsuchi Uchida, the Japanese Consul General from New York, men with money (or access to money) made their way from Japan to Texas to farm rice. Upon their arrival they were assisted by “colonization agents.” Hired by railroad companies in an effort to increase agricultural commerce and thus support the many new miles of track being laid, these agents provided newcomers with free railway passage and otherwise facilitated the purchase of land and equipment. Among these early settlers were a banker, a newspaper journalist, several businessmen, former Japanese military officers, a politician turned university president, and even a prominent Japanese socialist by the name of Sen Katayama. These men invested considerable sums to procure land and the heavy equipment—seed drills, harvesting binders, and steam-operated threshing machines—needed to farm rice on a large scale. They brought other Japanese with them as well, primarily field hands to perform the hard labor required of any agricultural operation. They also brought their own customs and manner of dress, as documented by local reports of men wearing strange conical hats, rain gear and sandals, all made of rice straw.

While the new arrivals may have shared a cultural heritage, they nonetheless chose to organize their farms in different ways. Some were close-knit colonies where the owners paid wages to their Japanese workers. One operation, owned by brothers Rihei and Toraiichi Onishi, leased 100-acre tracts of land near Mackay to sharecroppers and required two-fifths of the crop as

rent; the Onishis also ran a sort of company store that sold food and clothing to their lessees. On other farms Japanese workers were in short supply, putting local laborers in high demand. These farmworkers were a diverse group: African Americans, Anglos, Mexican Americans, Louisiana French, Austrians, and White Russians were all reported to have worked as agricultural laborers.

As would be expected, some operations were successful, while others were not. The most costly failure was a venture in Dacosta run by Major Oshimaru Takayama, a former Japanese artillery officer. The farm reportedly lasted only two years and lost investors an estimated \$100,000 when it folded, a considerable amount in 1908. The Japanese rice colonists in southeast Texas, as with all farmers in the states, were severely affected in 1918 by the dramatic drop in market prices for rice and other grains following the end of World War I. A few farms survived by switching crops, but the crisis caused many Japanese workers to suddenly lose their jobs. Some found work in nearby plant nurseries and restaurants owned by fellow Japanese Texans, while others simply moved away. By 1920 the U.S. Census counted 449 Japanese in Texas, an increase of only 109 from 10 years earlier.

In the early 1900s a number of Japanese entered Texas via El Paso, long a border crossing for Chinese immigrants—it even had its own so-called Chinatown. After Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, El Paso became a favored entry point for former Japanese soldiers who were having trouble entering the country at other locations. Many were seeking employment as construction workers for railroad companies, but an agreement between the U.S. and Japan kept such workers out: unable to immigrate legally, an untold number entered Texas illegally.

The 1910s saw continued Japanese immigration into Texas via Mexico due to unrest near the border caused by the Mexican Revolution resulting in Immigration Service suspension of regulations for both Jap-



anese and Chinese. During this period Japanese were also arriving in the border areas of Texas from other western states such as California, where they experienced considerable discrimination. The Rio Grande Valley area west of Brownsville was a particularly popular destination due to its mild climate and fertile but undeveloped farmland. One migrant to the Valley was Uichi Shimotsu, who settled near McAllen after graduating from a Colorado agricultural college; in 1916 he returned to Japan to bring Takako Tsuji back to Texas as his wife. Takako later told her children, “It was like going into darkest Africa!” Other Japanese families settled in scattered parts of the Valley, farming mostly cotton in the summer and vegetables in the winter. Although separated by miles of rough roads and farmland, Japanese families congregated on special holidays to eat, drink, and socialize. Later in the 1930s these immigrants formed the Rio Grande Valley Royals, a social club for their children. On occasion the Royals met with the Lone Star Club, a similar group made up of the offspring of rice colonists from around Houston.

In 1920 California passed strict legislation prohibiting Japanese immigrants from owning land, and in 1921 a similar alien land law was introduced in the Texas Legislature. In response, Japanese landowners in southeast Texas banded with Japanese businessmen from Dallas cotton firms to fight the bill. Their leader was Saburo Arai, a well-respected nurseryman from Houston who provided letters of support from white Texans and testified for the group before a Texas Senate committee. Although the legislation eventually passed, a compromise was struck which allowed Japanese currently living in Texas to keep their land and to purchase more in the future. Despite these concessions, the Texas land law accomplished its intent: with no prospect of owning land, few Japanese newcomers were attracted to the state. In 1924 the final blow came at the national level when Congress passed the

Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1934), halting all immigration of Japanese into the United States.

The Japanese who remained in Texas lived and worked without incident until December 7, 1941: almost immediately after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI searched the homes of Japanese throughout the state, often taking the head of the household to jail. The bank accounts of Japanese Texans were frozen, and travel was severely restricted. Out of a sense of self-preservation, some Japanese changed the names of their businesses: thus, the Japanese Restaurant, which was established by “Tom Brown” Okasaki in Houston at the turn of the century, became the U.S. Café. In San Antonio city officials voted to change the name of the Japanese Tea Garden in Brackenridge Park to the Chinese Tea Garden; in the process they evicted Alice Jingu and her five children from the garden’s tea pavilion, where they had lived and served tea to the public for 24 years.

In 1940 the U.S. Census counted only 458 Japanese in Texas. In a strange twist, World War II would cause this number to increase by tenfold due to the creation of three wartime internment camps in the state. In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced removal of “any and all persons” from prescribed military zones in western states and providing the basis for mass exclusion of Japanese Americans. One camp, located at Seagoville, southeast of Dallas, was built in 1940 as a model reformatory for women; it eventually housed 50 female Japanese-language instructors who had been arrested on the West Coast following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Japanese immigrants to Latin America were later housed there after being taken from their homes (primarily in Peru) and deported to the U.S., presumably to be traded in prisoner of war exchanges for American noncombatants trapped behind enemy lines. Others from Latin America, including Germans, Italians, and Japanese, were interned in a camp near Kenedy, southeast of San Antonio. Originally constructed for

the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), this camp also held Japanese Americans, including some from Texas, before it was converted in September 1944 to house German POWs.

The third internment camp was located at Crystal City in south Texas. Before the war it had been a government housing camp for migrant agricultural workers, but in December 1942 it opened as a “family” camp, designed to reunite family members incarcerated at various camps throughout the country and to hold families deported from Latin America. Eventually it also housed some 1,000 Germans who had been arrested under circumstances similar to the Japanese following Pearl Harbor. At its height Crystal City housed 4,000 internees, more than two-thirds of whom were Japanese. With its administration offices, hospital, grocery store, schools, and row upon row of houses, the camp functioned much like any small town, except, of course, for the surrounding fence and guard towers. The high school, which was named Federal High, even had a football team— but they had no other team to play against. Local townspeople had jobs in the camp, and the internees worked peacefully alongside them as store clerks, librarians, shoe repairmen, barbers, and beauticians. By all accounts the Japanese also lived in harmony with the Germans at Crystal City. Although they occupied different areas of the camp, there was ample opportunity for the two groups to mix, from playing music in a camp orchestra to attending German- or Japanese- language classes.

The end of the war saw the eventual closing of the three Texas internment camps. Rather than return to their home states, some internees chose to remain in Texas, among them Isamu Taniguchi, who later created the well-known Taniguchi Japanese Garden in Austin’s Zilker Park. Japanese from concentration camps in other states also moved to the Lone Star State for its economic opportunities and its small but stable core of Japanese residents. The end of the war saw a soft-

ening of anti-Japanese sentiment in the U.S. and in Texas, partly in response to the deeds of the all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT). One of the most decorated units in the military, the 442nd was best known for its heroic rescue of the 1st Battalion of the 36th Infantry Division, Texas National Guard—the so-called Lost Battalion—in southern France. While other units had been unable to reach the surrounded infantrymen, the 442nd RCT fought back German defenses for five days in a cold rain before finally breaking through to save the lives of 211 Texans. During the battle the 442nd lost 200 Japanese-American soldiers, with 600 more wounded. At least one of the dead, Saburo Tanamachi, was himself a Texan, and he was one of the first two Japanese Americans to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

In the years after the war the descendants of the first Japanese immigrants to the state have taken their places among their fellow Texans, integrating themselves into a society as familiar to them as Japan was to their ancestors. To be sure, in the 1950s and 1960s they faced discrimination and prejudice, as did other ethnic groups, but they also received kindness and understanding from Texans who knew the story of the Lost Battalion. Over time these younger Japanese Texans have broken the patterns of their parents by moving away from agricultural pursuits into myriad other occupations. Changes in patterns of marriage have also occurred, with marriages between people of differing ethnicities becoming much more common.

Further evidence of Japanese Texans assimilating into the broader society can be seen in their accomplishments in various sports. One notable standout is Austin-born Bryan Clay, who is half Japanese American and half African American: Clay took the silver medal in the decathlon in the 2004 Olympics and the gold medal in the 2005 World Championships. In some way his accomplishments are tied to the legacy of another Japanese Texan, Taro Kishi, who was brought to this country as a child by his parents in

1907. He lived on the Kishi farm in Terry, Texas, until 1922, when he enrolled at Texas A&M to study agriculture. A gifted athlete, Kishi was a halfback on the A&M varsity football team and was the first player of Japanese descent to play intercollegiate sports in the Southwest Conference.

In the years after World War II Japanese newcomers to Texas increased. Many of the new arrivals were so-called war brides, the wives of American soldiers who had been stationed in Japan during the Occupation. Their ability to immigrate was made possible by the G.I. Fiancées Act (1946) and the McCarran-Walter Act (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952). After nearly three decades of the United States excluding Asians from immigrating, the latter legislation legalized Japanese immigration once again (albeit in small numbers). Equally important, it gave longtime Japanese residents the right to pursue American citizenship, which many in Texas did. A symbolic end to past discrimination against the Japanese came in 1988 with passage of the Civil Liberties Act, which offered both an apology and reparations payments to Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated during the war. It is noteworthy that the redress and reparations movement leading up to the passage of the act had its beginnings in 1970, when a California educator and civil rights activist named Edison Uno first championed the idea. Edison Uno was a Texan for only a short time—as a teenager he was imprisoned at the internment camp at Crystal City—but all Texans can be proud of his efforts on behalf of Japanese Americans everywhere.

# Timeline for Japanese Americans in Texas

(Compiled by Thomas Walls)

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- 1900 • U.S. Census reports 13 Japanese living in Texas
  - 1902 • Sadatsuchi Uchida, Japanese Consul General from New York, visits Texas to investigate the feasibility of establishing large-scale rice farming ventures on the coastal plains around Houston and Beaumont
  - 1903 • First rice farms operated by Japanese immigrants are established
  - 1904–05 • Japan defeats Russia in Russo-Japanese War; newly discharged Japanese soldiers and sailors seek employment in the U.S. working for railroad companies, with many attempting to cross into the U.S. at El Paso
  - 1908 • Major Oshimaru Takayama's rice venture in Dacosta folds and loses Japanese investors more than \$100,000
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- 1910 • Japanese population in Texas reaches 340
  - 1910s • Japanese continue to move to the Texas border region from Mexico and western states such as California
  - 1916 • Uichi Shimotsu, one of the first Japanese to settle the Lower Rio Grande Valley, returns to Japan to marry Takako Tsuji and brings his new wife to his farm near McAllen in the Valley
  - 1918 • Grain prices, including that of rice, fall dramatically with the end of World War I, severely impacting Japanese rice-farming ventures in Texas
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- 1920 • U.S. Census counts 449 Japanese in Texas
  - California passes a so-called alien land law that severely restricts Japanese ownership of land in the state
  - 1921 • Texas passes its own alien land law; opposition by Japanese Texans results in a compromise version allowing Japanese already living in Texas to keep their land
  - 1922–26 • Taro Kishi attends Texas A&M to study agriculture, becoming the first individual of Japanese descent to play intercollegiate sports in the Southwest Conference
  - 1924 • Congress passes the Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924), halting all immigration of Japanese into the United States
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- 1930 • Japanese population in Texas reaches 519
  - 1930s • Rio Grande Valley Royals social club is formed for children of Japanese settlers in south Texas; they occasionally meet with the Lone Star Club, a similar group from the Houston area
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- 1940 • U.S. Census counts only 458 Japanese Texans
  - 1941 • On December 7 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into World War II
  - 1942 • Seagoville and Kenedy internment camps open in April; Crystal City “family” camp opens in November
  - 1944 • The all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) rescues the Texas “Lost Battalion” in southern France

- 1945 • World War II ends
- 1946 • Congress passes the G.I. Fiancées Act, permitting foreign-born brides of American servicemen entry into the United States
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- 1952 • Congress passes the McCarran-Walter Act (Immigration and Nationality Act), allowing Japanese once again to immigrate to the U.S. (albeit in small numbers) and allowing them to become U.S. citizens for the first time
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- 1970 • Edison Uno champions the idea of providing redress and reparations payments to all Japanese Americans interned during World War II
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- 1988 • Congress passes the Civil Liberties Act, offering an apology to all Japanese Americans interned during the war and authorizing payment of reparations to those still living
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- 2004 • Austin-born decathlete Bryan Clay who was raised by his Japanese American mother in Hawaii wins an Olympic silver medal