

## READING: THE ISSEI IMMIGRANTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Like the historical experiences of many other ethnic groups in the United States, the Japanese American historical experience is, at its core, the story of an ethnic minority struggling to find its place within U.S. society. This story begins with the experiences of the first generation of Japanese to land upon U.S. soil. This group of people, the immigrant generation, is known as the *issei*. (In Japanese, the term *issei* literally means "first generation.")



[Click here to see a larger version of this photo of Buntaro M. and Shinbei U., two friends who emigrated from Japan in 1903.](#)

### THE ISSEI AND THEIR STRUGGLES

Despite a few early ventures to Hawaii and California in the late 1860s, most *issei* arrived in the United States between 1885 and 1924. By 1910, the Japanese population was about 80,000 in Hawaii and 72,000 on the continental United States (mostly in the western states, especially California). The *issei*, like many of the late European immigrants (Italians, Poles, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and others), experienced great tribulations while trying to adapt to life in the United States. There was, however, one critical distinction between the Japanese and the Europeans. European immigrants could become naturalized citizens, but Japanese immigrants, like the Chinese who had immigrated before them, were not allowed to become U.S. citizens.



[In this video clip Susumu I. shares his father's immigration story. Click on the photo of Susumu to watch the video.](#)

The United States' first naturalization law was passed in 1790. This granted the right of naturalization to any alien who was a "free white person." In 1870, the right of naturalization was extended to "aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent." Asians, such as the Chinese and Japanese, who were neither white nor black, were classified as "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Without the right to naturalize, Japanese immigrants could not become U.S. citizens; without citizenship, they could not vote; without the right to vote, they had very little political influence.



[Click on this passport photo of B. Tazuma to see a larger version of the photo.](#)



[Click here to examine B. Tazuma's passport.](#)

### *The Labor Movement*

Many issei immigrated as laborers and worked in employment sectors such as agriculture, fishing, mining, and railroad construction. Issei workers, like other immigrant groups, were often brought in by factory and farm owners to break strikes or simply as cheaper labor. Although the issei were of the working class, they were usually barred from labor unions.



Issei railroad workers install train tracks in Snoqualmie, Washington.

By the time issei laborers were landing on U.S. shores, agricultural and industrial workers had established labor unions which represented their interests on issues such as wages, hours, and benefits. By 1900, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had emerged as the most prominent national labor organization. According to Yuji Ichioka, the rapid influx of Asian immigrant labor raised a fundamental question for the labor movement: Should the movement, in the name of class solidarity, recruit and enlist Asian laborers into its ranks, or should it exclude them, in support of racial separatism?[1]

The AFL's decision was to pursue policies that excluded Asians. In fact, the AFL became a vehement advocate for ending Japanese immigration to the United States, largely because of racial prejudice and resentment over the economic competition that the issei posed to white working-class Americans. Some white workers argued that Japanese immigrant laborers maintained a lower standard of living, allowing them to work for less money than white laborers. Other organized labor unions helped to establish anti-Japanese organizations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League (founded in 1905) and the Japanese Exclusion League of California (founded in 1920).



"Their God is not his God. Their hopes, their ambitions, their love of this country are nothing to him..." [Click here to read this quote from the AFL's American Federationist in its entirety.](#)

### *Alien Land Laws*[2]

Despite the barriers that the issei faced in the employment sector, they achieved some economic success. Many issei who began as agricultural laborers worked their way up to become farmers. In

1909, Japanese farmers in California controlled around 150,000 acres of farmland. Ten years later, they controlled 450,000 acres. Although this latter figure represented only one percent of California's agricultural land, its crops represented about 10 percent of the total value of California's harvest.



Here is a photo of a berry-farming family in Washington state.

In 1913, California enacted an Alien Land Law in an attempt to stem this trend. The law itself avoided explicit reference to "Japanese" or "Asians" and instead opted for the phrase "aliens ineligible to citizenship." This was an indirect means of discriminating against Asians since, as mentioned above, Asians were the only racial group who fell under the status of "aliens ineligible to citizenship." The law effectively prohibited individual Japanese, and companies with a majority of Japanese stockholders, from purchasing agricultural land, and restricted the leasing of such land to three years. It also banned Japanese from bequeathing or selling any agricultural land they already owned to fellow immigrants. Many issei farmers, however, managed to circumvent this law by purchasing land in the name of their U.S.-born children.



[Click here to watch a video of Junkoh H. explaining how his family acquired land despite the alien land laws.](#)

The Alien Land Law of 1920 (and its subsequent amendments) plugged this loophole by prohibiting the appointment of "aliens ineligible to citizenship" as guardians of minors in whose name agricultural land was purchased. This 1920 law threatened to destroy the economic foundation of Japanese immigrant society. Other western states followed suit and enacted similar laws, fearing that "hordes" of California Japanese would invade their states.

Issei community leaders organized and challenged the constitutionality of these laws. The only real legal victory for the issei came on the issue of guardianship. On May 1, 1922, the California State Supreme Court ruled that the state could only deny guardianship on the basis of proven incompetency. This effectively overturned the section of the 1920 Alien Land Law that barred the issei from serving as guardians of their U.S.-born children in whose name they purchased agricultural land.

The enforcement of these laws undoubtedly undermined the economic foundations of Japanese immigrant society. Japanese agricultural land ownership between 1920 and 1925 fell 44 percent. The amount of Japanese-leased acreage during the same period plunged more than 75 percent.

### *The Gentlemen's Agreement (1907–08)[3] and the Immigration Act of 1924*

Starting with a series of anti-Japanese articles in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in early 1905, antagonism toward Japanese immigrants in the San Francisco area intensified. This growing hostility fueled legislative efforts to curtail the immigration of Japanese to the United States. In December 1905, California congressmen introduced bills into Congress that would stop further Japanese

immigration. The issei in San Francisco faced boycotts and physical violence, especially after the great earthquake of 1906.



This *San Francisco Chronicle* article from March 2, 1905 declares statewide discrimination against Japanese workers in California.

In October of 1906, amid this anti-Japanese milieu, the San Francisco School Board, carrying out a campaign promise of the mayor, ordered all Japanese and Korean pupils to join the Chinese students at a segregated school. Although there were only 93 pupils of Japanese origin in the entire San Francisco school system, the news reached Tokyo and the order assumed international proportions.

President Theodore Roosevelt decried the segregation order and advocated a congressional act allowing the issei to become naturalized citizens. Roosevelt was denounced in California newspapers and anti-Japanese leaders hardened their stances. To satisfy these forces, Roosevelt and Secretary of State Elihu Root sought negotiations with Japan to restrict further immigration. The Gentlemen's Agreement, an exchange of notes between the Japanese and U.S. governments in the winter of 1907–08, was the agreement that the two governments forged. Japan pledged to issue passports only to limited categories of people, such as merchants, students, and diplomats.

Loopholes in the Gentlemen's Agreement, however, unexpectedly accelerated the migration of Japanese women to the United States. Some of the female immigrants were the wives of men who had returned to Japan to marry; others were picture brides--issei women who came to the United States to marry husbands they knew only from photographs. The arrival of these women helped to change the nature of the Japanese American community from one of male migrant laborers to one of families seeking permanent settlement in the United States.



Here are four "picture brides" being processed upon arrival at Angel Island, California. Click on the photo to see a larger version.



In this video clip Mary H. tells the story of her mother, a "picture bride." Click on the photo of Mary to watch the video.

By the early 1920s, there was a general sentiment across the nation that immigration needed to be restricted somehow. California and other western states desired legislation that would ban all immigration from Japan. On the other hand, much of the rest of the country did not want a law that overtly discriminated against Japan, a modern industrial and military power. Ultimately, Congress did pass a bill aimed specifically at ending Japanese immigration that dramatically limited all immigration from Asia. President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill into law on May 24, 1924. Although no mass

protest rallies were held, the issei interpreted the enactment of the Immigration Law of 1924 as an act of discrimination.

In sum, the 1924 Immigration Act represented the issei's failed struggle against exclusion. They were barred from labor unions and the United States' own Supreme Court upheld their ineligibility to citizenship or to own land. Branded as "aliens," issei efforts to assimilate into U.S. society had been frustrated. Although the anti-Japanese exclusion movement left an enduring residue of bitterness, the issei had a ray of hope--their U.S.-born children, known collectively as *nisei* (or "second generation"). The issei transferred their hopes and dreams to the *nisei*.



This is a photo of Mr. Tazuma (see passport photo above) and his family in front of their store in Seattle's "Japan Town."

1. Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 91.
2. Summarized from Brian Niiya, *Japanese American History* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), pp. 99-100.
3. Summarized from Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, USA* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) pp. 20-21.

## Questions

- In what ways do you think the issei were disadvantaged by not being able to join labor unions?
- Do you think U.S. society was fearful of the Japanese? Why or why not?
- In what ways did policymakers use the term "aliens ineligible to citizenship" to deprive the issei of certain civil rights? Why do you think they opted to use the term "Japanese" or "Asians"?
- What do you think were the advantages or disadvantages of cooperating with federal authorities?
- What do you think were the advantages or disadvantages of resisting federal authorities?