

Issei Faced Discrimination

The Issei faced prejudice, discrimination and hatred from when they first arrived in America. The 1790 *Naturalization Act* limited naturalization to immigrants who were “free white persons”. Japanese were thus ineligible for citizenship. No matter how many years they lived here, the Issei could not become an U.S. Citizens and thus could not vote or serve on juries or hold public office and thus had zero political power.

California’s 1913 *Alien Land Law* stated the Issei could not buy land in California. At that time 50% of the Issei were associated with farming. It is difficult to be a farmer if you don’t own the land. Because the Issei could not vote, they had no influence on the legislature or executive branch of the government. The court was the only avenue they had. The Issei went to court many times to challenge the *Alien Land Law*. They had the Japanese Association, the Nihonjinkai, with many chapter in California, Oregon and Washington. It was the task of the local chapter to originate a test case, hire lawyers, raise money and go to court.

In 1923, the Issei had four alien land cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. They were; *Terrace vs. Thompson*; *Porterfield vs. Webb**; *Webb vs. O’Brien** and *Frick vs. Webb**. In one week in November of 1923, the Issei lost all four cases. The Issei were stunned. It was a severe blow to their economic foundation and caused a sense of despair.

In 1924, Congress passed the *Immigration Act* which prevented further immigration from Japan. The Issei called this day “Kokujokubi”, the “National Day of Humiliation”. The reaction here and in Japan was bitter and angry. Many Issei lost hope and returned to Japan.

Restricted housing covenants here in LA prevented the Japanese from living in 80% of the city – they were forced to live in Japanese ghettos. Now you young people know why we have places such as Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights and Sawtelle Blvd.

The 1921 California State Political Code allowed segregated public schools for the Chinese, Mongolian and Japanese students. Around Sacramento, the cities of Florin, Walnut Grove, Isleton and Courtland and down here in El Monte, there was a school for white children and a separate school for Japanese children. The Japanese could go swimming in a municipal pool only on the day before they emptied the swimming pool of water.

In 1922, Congress passed the *Cable Act* which stated that if a white or Nisei woman married an Issei man, she lost her US Citizenship. If a white woman’s marriage ended, she regained her US Citizenship. If a Nisei woman’s marriage ended, she still lost her US Citizenship and could not become a US citizen because she is from an ineligible race.

In 1880, California passed a law that prohibited a white from marrying a Negro, mulatto, Mongol or Malay. In 1909, that law was amended to include the Japanese.

In 1939, the FBI developed the Custodian Detention Index which had the ABC List. The most “dangerous” Issei were supposed to be on that List. Instead, the “Community leaders” were on the List. They were under surveillance before Pearl Harbor. They were quickly arrested and interned on and after Dec 7. But remember, during WWII, no person of Japanese ancestry was ever charge, brought to trial or convicted of spying or sabotaging for Japan.

In 1941, there were about 150,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the mainland and another 150,000 Japanese living in Hawaii. On the mainland, 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated in 10 Concentration Camps while in Hawaii, only 2,000 Japanese were interned. And remember, Hawaii was bombed and closer to Japan.

While their parents were in the Concentration Camp, the Mainland Nisei boys joined the Hawaiian Nisei boys to form the 100th Battalion and the 442nd to fight in Europe with “Uncommon Courage”. The story of the MIS proved that the Kibei were 100% American.

In 1945, the Japanese People were allowed to return to the West Coast States. They were again met with prejudice, discrimination and hatred. The general population then learned of the bravery of the Nisei soldiers. Slowly the attitude of the public changed. The Issei were allowed to become citizens. Anti-miscegenation laws, restrictive housing covenants, and Alien Land Laws were declared unconstitutional or repealed. And now the Japanese were the “Model Minority”.

The Japanese People are now so respected that Nikkei politicians like to emphasize that they are Japanese. You Sansei and Yonsei should be proud to be a descendent of the Issei.

With the Redress and Reparation Movement and the payment of \$20,000. everybody thought that America learned that the Incarceration of the Japanese in WWII was wrong. But last December, a Trump supporter claimed that Incarceration of the Japanese in WWII was a “Precedent” and that it could be used against the Muslim People. The Muslims are facing prejudice, discrimination and hatred just the like Issei faced 100 years ago.

I know that the Issei will want us to support the Muslim Community today. This is the best way to show the Issei that we learned the lesson on how they were treated 100 years ago and that we will not let that happen to another Immigrant Community. If you support the Muslim Community today, the Issei would be proud to have the Sansei and Yonsei as their descendent.

Kanji Sahara