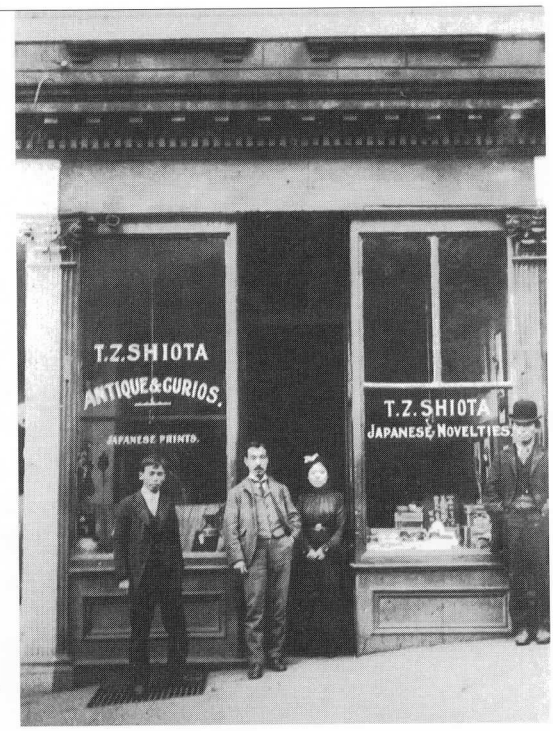

T.Z. Shiota Co. at 629 Dupont St. (Grant Ave) was one of two stores in Chinatown owned by Mr. Shiota. c. 1902.
Japanese American History Archives.

SAN FRANCISCO'S PREWAR JAPANTOWN:

The Shaping of a Community

by Gary Kawaguchi, PhD and Shizue Seigel*

As port of entry for the earliest Japanese immigrants, San Francisco's *Nikkei* community was the oldest on the United States mainland, and until 1906, the largest. Social, economic and political bodies born in San Francisco, such as churches, *kenjin-kai,* and the Japanese American Citizens' League, subsequently spread throughout the West Coast, and later, nation-wide.

Furthermore, at key points in history, events originating in San Francisco impacted the *Nikkei* on a national basis. In the early 1900s, San Francisco's relentlessly anti-Japanese press incited hostility which led to the exclusion of immigrants and the denial of the civil rights to all Japanese Americans. During World War II, the Presidio of San Francisco, headquarters of the Western Defense Command, implemented the eviction and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans.

But the story of San Francisco's Japantown goes beyond victimization. Over and over, the community, like many other *Nikkei* enclaves, has demonstrated the flexibility, resourcefulness, and organizing skills to respond to both the community's local needs and national *Nikkei* issues.

The seeds of immigration. San Francisco was the logical site for the first Japanese Consulate on the mainland (1870). Boasting a deep natural harbor, and fueled by the Gold Rush, the city grew tremendously in the 1850s, and became the leading metropolis of the West by the 1880s.

On the other side of the Pacific, Commodore Perry challenged Japan's isolationist government by steaming the American fleet into Tokyo Bay in 1853. The result was the Treaty of Kanegawa (1854), which established diplomatic relations with the U.S., opened Japanese ports, allowed freer trade and legalized emigration, thus permitting Japanese subjects to leave and re-enter Japan for the first time.

A few years later, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 ended the feudal system. Recognizing that Western ideas should be studied rather than resisted, the Meiji government encouraged young men to travel abroad to absorb Western technology and military tactics and bring them back to Japan.

The early migrants. Students, both government-sponsored and individuals, formed the first significant influx of Japanese migrants to the area. Forming a small, close-knit community, the students attended school to learn English while supporting themselves as "schoolboys." These live-in domestics exchanged cooking, cleaning and yardwork for room and board. Despite the language barrier, they were reputed to be clean, hard-working and willing to work for less than their European counterparts.

The first institutions. Daunted by the long hours, low pay and difficulties learning English, many "schoolboys" abandoned their educational dreams and shifted their ambitions to earning a nest egg to take home to Japan. Far from home and discouraged by the difficulties encountered in America, some were drawn to the temporary solace of drinking and gambling. To encourage a higher moral tone, religious institutions sprang up. The Fukuin Kai, the Japanese Gospel Society, believed to be first Japanese organization in the U.S.,

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Uoki Fish Market, owned by Kitaichi Sakai, sold fish, octopus, squid, shellfish, abalone, and canned goods. The store's name derived from "uo" (fish and "ki" (from the owner's first name.) The store moved several times in its long history. Above is 1529B Geary St. Japanese American History Archives.

first met formally in 1877, at the Chinese Mission in Chinatown.[1] In addition to English classes and a boarding house, the Gospel Society provided a place to socialize and network. In the mid-1880s the group split, leading to the establishment of the first Japanese Christian churches.[2] Furthermore, a revival held by the Methodists in 1889 inspired followers to move to other *Nikkei* settlements along the West Coast and in the Central Valley and encouraged the establishment of more Japanese American churches.

While many *Issei* were drawn to Christian organizations, which they identified with "progressive" Western thought and with access to English classes, other migrants preferred to stick to the spiritual values of home. By 1898, the Buddhists had started a Bukkyo Seinenkai, (Young Men's Buddhist Association, or YMBA) chapter at the Pythian Castle Auditorium.[3] Within 10 years, 19 Jodo Shinshu Buddhist churches and branch churches had been established on the West Coast, with San Francisco serving as headquarters.

Also crucial to the social fabric were the *kenjin-kai* (associations of people from the same *ken* or prefecture in Japan). In the late 19th century, different regions of Japan had significant variances in dialect and custom. The expatriates felt most comfortable among people from their home region. The majority of immigrants hailed from a few, mostly southern, prefectures. The Jumo-Jin-Kai (Gunma Ken) was founded in 1890. Hiroshima, Kumamoto, Wakayama, and Fukuoka *kenjin-kai* soon followed. At their prefectural organizations, migrants could relax with those of similar backgrounds, share leads for jobs and housing and help each other through hard times. Some *kenjin-kai* formed revolving credit unions *(tanomoshi)* for business ventures, burial expenses, and other monetary needs.

Businesses and occupations. Between the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which restricted Chinese immigration, and the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement, which barred Japanese laborers, the character of Japanese immigration shifted. Japan was undergoing an economic depression, and many unskilled males from rural areas were attracted to the plantations of Hawaii, then to the mainland, as contract laborers. Often, after working out their contracts, they had few savings. Reluctant to return to Japan empty-handed, many made their way to San Francisco where *Nikkei* employment agencies funneled them into rural agricultural jobs or fish cannery jobs in Alaska. Local jobs remained limited to the established market for domestics, gardeners or employees of Japanese-owned businesses.

Japanese hotels and merchants sprang up to serve arriving and departing travelers, as did trading companies importing Japanese goods to the U.S. and shipping American goods to Japan. As the community grew, so did its need for grocers, barbers, and other services. Trade organizations developed for businesses, such as shoe repair and hand laundries. One of the first Japanese-owned corporations in the U.S., best-known as the California Flower Market, began as an informal marketing cooperative for local *Issei* flower growers.

Early locations. Since the racial climate was overtly hostile to Asian immigrants in the segregated city, the Japanese were restricted as to where they could settle and do business. In the South of Market area,[4] a 1900 directory lists an employment agency, 12 hotels, 2 pool halls, 2 bookstores, 2 bathhouse, a *manju* shop and a dentist. In and around Chinatown,[5] there were 7 art goods stores, 5 general stores, 10

Japantown Overview *(cont'd next pg.)*

1. At 916 Washington, then at 531 Jessie St. and then at 725 Geary St.
2 An offshoot of the original group founded the Japanese Presbyterian Church of San Francisco (Dai-Ichi Choro Kyokai) in 1885 and the Japanese YMCA(121 Haight St.) in 1886. The Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church, a direct descendant of the Japanese Gospel Society, first met in borrowed rooms in the Central Methodist Church on Jessie St. in 1886 and opened their own church in 1894 at 1359 Pine St. Saint Paul's Episcopal Church was established in 1895, and the First Reformed Church in 1910.
3. 909 Market St.
4. Concentrated along two alleys, Jessie and Stevenson, hidden between the Old Mint on 5th St. and the U.S. Post Office on 7th.
5. Sutter to Sacramento, Kearney to Powell. 10 more art goods stores were in Lower Nob Hill, on Geary, Post and Sutter between Stockton and Jones.

Japantown Overview *(con't from p. 5)*

restaurants, 6 shooting galleries, 11 hotels, 9 barbers, 3 pool halls, 3 confectioneries, 3 bookstores, a bank, a newspaper, a shipping company office, a drug store, and even a midwife. The majority of *Nikkei* frequented these two neighborhoods, although there was a scattering of businesses further afield.

Rising racism. The 1900 U.S. Census recorded a 1200% increase of Japanese in the U.S. – from 2,039 to 24,326 in ten years. Although most entrants didn't linger in San Francisco, and the city's *Nikkei* population was under 2,000, it became the scene of the first large-scale anti-Japanese rally, led by Mayor James D. Phelan and supported by labor groups. At the time, a majority of the city's population was foreign-born, but European immigrants and the unions they controlled pushed to exclude Asians from competition for jobs.

Japan's unexpected victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 increased mistrust and paranoia among European Americans who felt threatened by the specter of a non-white, recently "backward" country defeating a white, European country. The Asiatic Exclusion League, founded with participation from 67 local organizations, campaigned to exclude Japanese and Koreans from the United States.

In reaction, existing Japanese organizations formed a coalition: the Zaibei Nihonjin Rengo Kyogi-Kai, later the Zaibei Nihonjin-Kai (Japanese Association). The Zaibei Nihonjin-Kai vigorously protested anti-Asian activities and legislation. They also took a strong stand against gambling and other activities which they thought would tarnish the image of the entire Japanese community.

Although briefly subdued by the 1906 earthquake and fire, anti-Japanese attacks soon became so common that scientists from Tokyo Imperial University, surveying the damaged city, were attacked more than a dozen times. In October of the same year, the San Francisco Board of Education ordered that Japanese and Korean children attend the segregated Oriental School established for the Chinese in 1885. Although there were only 93 *Nikkei* students, including 25 American-born, the local matter soon gained national attention. Under pressure from the Japanese government, Pres. Theodore Roosevelt persuaded the Board of Education to back down. However, Japan agreed in a "Gentlemen's Agreement" not to issue passports to laborers emigrating to the mainland.

A shift towards permanence. The Gentlemen's Agreement brought another significant change to the community. Although new immigrant laborers were barred, those already living in the U.S. could send for their wives. Since arranged marriages were common in Japan, it was possible for a man to marry a "picture bride" *in absentia.* About 20,000 Japanese women entered the U.S. from 1907-1924.

The presence of wives gradually shifted the community's mindset from transience towards permanence. Marriages tend to be followed by births, and the American-born *Nisei* were U.S. citizens by right of birth. By making purchases in the name of their children, *Issei* parents could circumvent the alien land laws and acquire their own piece of America. Furthermore, many parents soon realized that their children were as American as they were Japanese and unlikely to share dreams of returning to Japan. The stage was set for a permanent community of businesses and residences. Community institutions such as churches, ladies auxiliaries, preschools and Japanese language schools were established and expanded.

SF Earthquake and Fire. The 1906 disaster, which killed over 3,000, caused massive destruction in key areas of the city, including downtown and the civic center area. The quake convinced many *Nikkei* to leave the San Francisco Bay Area, speeding the development of small Nihonmachis throughout California. Others moved to the Southland, and within a few years, the Japanese population in Los Angeles county outnumbered that of the Bay Area.

Both the South of Market and Chinatown areas suffered severe damage. Some Japanese businesses chose to rebuild their old locations. However, the future tenure of Asians in Chinatown was threatened. Since the 1880s, certain elements had agitated to clear the neighborhood of "Orientals," libeling the area as a crowded, opium-ridden source of disease and degeneration. The real reason, according to the *San Francisco News,* was that "Chinatown... occupied some of the most valuable real estate in San Francisco... set between Nob Hill and the financial center of the West.... [W]ithin six days of the Great Fire, [a sub-unit of the General Relief Committee] adopted a plan to move Chinatown to Hunters Point." The Chinese government pressured to keep Chinatown where it was, but many Japanese merchants, including Nichibei Bussan, decided to relocate.

Relocation to the Western Addition. A May 17, 1906 editorial in *Shin-Sekai (The New World),* the house organ of the Japanese YMCA, declared that relocation would "very likely center itself formally around the neighborhood of Fillmore Street." The author deemed Chinatown and South of Market "undesirable" areas where "the lawless ones... [would be] opening stores as a sideline to their scandalous business...

North side of South Park, c. 1920, showing the Omiya Hotel, Omiya Co. and Biwako Bath at 108-110 South Park St.; Iki Hotel and Fuku-Gumi Tailor at #104-106; and Bochow Hotel at #102. Except for the large block of flats at the center of the picture, most of these buildings are still standing. Today, the area's low-income residents are threatened by the encroachment of high-tech companies into the neighborhood. Japanese American History Archives.

[and] catering to those connected... [with] shady activities." Although at the time, the Western Addition had few Japanese businesses,[6] the author speculated that "This will become the largest Nihonjin-Machi in San Francisco... [and] include a mixture of those who were previously engaged in respectable businesses along Dupont Street."

The Western Addition, or Fillmore District, just west of Van Ness, was largely untouched by the disaster. For several years, while the Financial District, Market Street and the Civic Center were being reconstructed, the area served as the commercial and political center of the city. The *Shin-Sekai* editorial shrewdly predicted that as the devastated areas were rebuilt, "rents in the Fillmore district will be forced down, and the Japanese will gradually occupy the buildings.... for now, it would be a big mistake to pay high rents in this area, or to rent defective buildings in need of much repair."

The new Nihonjin Machi[7] was concentrated between Laguna and Webster, and Geary and Bush, with a scattering of businesses extending from Octavia to Fillmore and O'Farrell to California. Small enclaves continued to exist outside of Nihonjin Machi, however. Hiroshi Kashiwagi reports in *Mondo, an Oral History of the San Francisco Buddhist Church* that "there was a thriving mini-Japantown on Gough St. between Pine and Austin Way, according to Eiko Ono, who was born at 163 Gough St. in 1909. It was a small, one-block area consisting of a boarding house operated by her mother, a grocery store, a cleaner's, a barbershop and Dr. Kurozawa's office. Across the street was her uncle's tailor shop. Few homes had baths in those days so they went to the Japanese bathhouse which was located behind their house. 'It was convenient for our family, we would go to the bath through the back way in our *nemaki* (night clothes), carrying a washcloth.'" Ono also recalled garbagemen, delivery people, laundrymen and fruit and vegetable peddlers in horse-drawn carts, and said her family moved to Japantown proper in the mid-1920s.

Almost every need could be filled in Nihonjin Machi – there were stores for groceries, dry goods, hardware, books, cameras, medicines.[8] Confectioneries catered to East-West sweet-tooths with soda fountain treats and fresh-made *senbei* and *manju.* Restaurants large and small served everything from American-style breakfasts to Japanese dinners. The ubiquitous "Chop Suey" signs signaled Chinese food adapted to Japanese tastes. There were pool halls, employment agencies, hotels and boarding houses with home-cooked Japanese meals for single laborers. Churches abounded, along with ladies auxiliaries *(fujin-kai)*, Japanese language schools, Scout troops and sports teams.

South Park had originally been developed in 1854 by Englishman George Gordon as a block of upscale residences circling a park-like grassy oval. The neighborhood declined when the wealthy deserted the area for Nob Hill, and later burned in 1906. The new working-class and industrial neighborhood that was rebuilt was ideally situated for *Nikkei* businesses serving travelers to and from Japan. South Park lay between the railroad station and Piers 34 and 36, which were used by two Japanese shipping companies, Toyo Kisen Kaisha and Nippon Yusen Kaisha. By 1910, Japanese-operated hotels and general merchandise stores occupied the entire north side of South Park. The *Issei* businesses in South Park waned after the Immigration Act of 1924 blocked the flow of newcomers from Japan. The final blow came in 1933, when the cargo ships moved to Piers 25 and 35 (near Levi Plaza).

The 1940s. The Japanese community in San Francisco swelled to over 5,000 by 1940. A directory published that year lists over 200 businesses in Nihonjin Machi, selling everything from fishing tackle to jewelry, with an additional 50-odd businesses in Chinatown. The thriving, self-sufficient community had its own doctors, dentists and optometrists, lawyers, insurance agents, plumbers and auto mechanics, as well as 12 churches and two hospitals.

Japantown Overview *(cont'd on p. 15)*

6. On Fillmore near Eddy and near California.
7. The Issei *called their neighborhood Nihonjin Machi (Japanese People's Town (a town where Japanese people happen to live), not the current Nihon Machi (Japantown), which could be interpreted as a colony of Japan.*
8. At one time there were five drugstores in the area. Only one, Jim's Drugs, returned after WWII. Jim's Drugs is still operating in the Miyako Mall.

Japantown Overview *(cont'd from p. 7)*

All this changed with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Within days, community leaders were arrested by the FBI. Cameras and radios were confiscated and bank accounts frozen.[9] As rumors of eviction grew, a fortunate few were able to find caretakers for their businesses and real property, but many had to sell what they owned for a pittance, or abandon it. Since evictees were only allowed to take what they could carry, neighborhood churches offered their gymnasiums and social halls to store personal belongings.

On March 27, 1942, the first group of Japanese Americans received orders to "evacuate" on two days' notice. San Francisco *Nikkei* were sent to "Assembly Centers" at Tanforan and Santa Anita racetracks, where they were housed in horse stalls and hastily-built barracks. The evictees were later assigned to concentration camps, with the majority going to Topaz, Utah.

The abandoned buildings in Japantown did not stay vacant for long. As a port with a large military presence, San Francisco was brimming with jobs in ship-building and other war industries which drew workers from all over the country. The Western Addition was flooded with new black migrants from the South. Lodging was in such high demand that the residences emptied by the eviction of the Japanese were soon crammed with workers, some of whom slept in shifts in "hot beds."

9. Businesses with foreign connections were forced to cease operations. Others besides companies trading with Japan were affected. For instance, Henry Tani's insurance business sold Canadian policies because prewar U.S. companies declined to do business with him. As a "foreign" (i.e. Canadian) company, his business was frozen.

World War II changed the character of the community forever. The San Francisco Nihonjin Machi never regained the size and prosperity it had in 1940.

Today, almost 60 years later, San Francisco's Japantown continues to survive, although challenges to its existence have never abated. For the early immigrants, Japantowns fulfilled identifiable needs: they were bulwarks against racism; cradles for the passing on of identity and cultural values; and meeting places from which to coalesce into collaborative action. The *Issei* recognized that mainstream society would not provide for all their needs, so created their own institutions – schools, churches, political and social organizations.

For *Nikkei* in America, not much has changed in a half-century – social, economic and political forces continue to pressure our communities. Racism and exclusion continue, though in subtler forms. Now more than ever, if we value our Japantowns and the preservation of things *Nikkei,* we need to do as the *Issei* did – join hands, roll up our sleeves and get to work. ■

Kinmon Gakuen *(cont'd from p. 13)*

When the lights came up at the end of the movie, we had tears streaming from our eyes, and wet cheeks, just like all the adults.

Kinmon Gakkuen played a very important role in the Japanese American community. More than a language school, it had a wide curriculum encompassing Japanese history, ethics and culture. During World War II when Japanese Americans were removed to concentration camps Kinmon Gakuen was designated as the gathering place for those San Franciscans being sent to Tanforan "Assembly Center." There are some poignant pictures taken at that time of the school with huge piles of baggage and clusters of internees sitting on the steps.

Kinmon reopened in 1948 after the internees returned to San Francisco. After the McCarran-Walters Immigration Act in 1952, citizenship classes for the *Issei* began, and in 1958, English classes for adults were added. Last year was Kinmon's 80th anniversary. At present there are 60 pupils with diverse backgrounds studying Japanese language and culture. They are far more serious and focused than we were. ■

Employment Agency *(cont'd from p. 10)*

Street. He placed them in strategic locations around the house. A few years later, when he was down to his last pair, Papa turned to me with a twinkle in his eyes and said, *"Kiku-chan, kono megane o wan gurosu katte kurenai, ka?* (Kiku, how about getting one gross of these glasses for me.)"

His lack of organization did not make him an exemplary businessman. People were his priority. After his death we found a stack of signed collection contracts – fees he had never collected.

Twenty or so years after Papa was gone, an elderly Filipino gentleman asked me, "Aren't you the daughter of Meestair Hori who had the employment agency?"

"Yes," I replied with surprise.

"Oh, I mees your Papa verry much," he intoned in his thick accent, his eyes glistening with tears. I could only grasp his hand in silence. No monument to Papa could match the memorial in this old man's heart. ■