

LITTLE TOKYO'S ENBUN

By Steven Kawa

For three generations of Nikkei, Enbun in Los Angeles was the place to see neighbors, exchange news and stock up on delicacies for Oshogatsu. The changing fortunes of one family mirrored those of Little Tokyo, the founder's grandson recalls.

Taro Kawa was born in Los Angeles, California on August 31, 1920, a few miles east of the city's civic center and Little Tokyo. His father, Jisaku Kawa, had immigrated several years earlier and founded Enbun Company, a grocery store offering Japanese products in Little Tokyo. As Taro recalls, Little Tokyo covered approximately four square city blocks bounded by Temple Street, Second Street, Central Avenue and Los Angeles Street, with its center at the intersection of First and San Pedro Streets. Nearby enterprises included Hori Department Store, Asahi Shoe and Union Church. Enbun Company was originally located on Weller Street, closer to the west end of Little Tokyo. As Enbun began to prosper, the store moved to First Street.

As a youngster, Taro worked on Saturdays in the narrow store, along with the eight or so employees. All spoke Japanese, as most of the customers were Japanese. In 1939, Taro was attending UCLA when his father died. As the older of two sons, he was handed the responsibility of managing Enbun. On the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Taro remembers the police suggesting that the store be closed a little earlier than usual because of the possibility that angry US citizens would want to retaliate against Japanese. But he could not recall anything happening that day or any subsequent day. Around May or June, Taro closed the doors to Enbun and was eventually interned with his mother and brother Kenji at the Gila River camp. He was allowed to leave the camp a couple of

times to sell his inventory and equipment. He remembers taking a trip to Salt Lake City to a Japanese-owned grocery store that purchased some of his refrigeration equipment.

While in camp, he met Toshiko Imada from Fresno. They married in Chicago in May 1944 and the following year, Taro, Toshiko and his mother and brother returned to the house on Soto Street in Boyle Heights.



Courtesy Steven Kawa

Holiday festivities at Enbun store, c. 1920, jubilantly combined two worlds.

Little Tokyo had changed significantly during the war. With Little Tokyo's proximity to Union Station and the exodus of the Japanese to internment camps, many African Americans had found residences and established businesses in Little Tokyo. As Japanese returned after the War, the neighborhood reverted back to being predominantly Japanese-owned businesses. Taro

doesn't recall any significant confrontations as the black population migrated south of Little Tokyo.

Some Japanese owners went back to Japan following the war, and some shops that existed before the war that did not reopen. Hori Department Store was one of those. New Japanese-owned businesses took their place. SK Uyeda Department Store, Anzen Hardware, Far East Cafe Sugar Bowl, and Tokyo Gardens were just a few who opened their doors after the War.

Rice lines and fresh tofu

It took some time for Enbun to procure products from Japan, so it operated as a conventional American grocery store selling milk, bread, canned goods, meats, fruits and vegetables. Rice was the one staple that was difficult to buy. There was a rice shortage, so Taro had to go to San

Francisco and ask the distributors to sell rice to Enbun. When the shipment of rice arrived, Taro and Toshiko worked through the night and early morning transferring the rice into five- and ten-pound bags. The next day, a line of customers wound down the street outside Enbun, waiting to buy the rice.

Enbun spent a couple of years re-establishing itself as one of the premier providers of Japanese food products. By the late 1940s the staff was again back to nine or ten employees. Enbun provided many of the local restaurants with fresh fish and meats, vegetables and *sake*. The store also provided home delivery service. A truck loaded with groceries would go out almost daily to residential customers in Boyle Heights, the Silver Lake area and the "Westside." By the late 1950s Enbun opened a second store, managed by Taro's brother Kenji, on Jefferson Boulevard in the Westside to meet the needs of a growing Japanese population.

During the 1950s and '60s, anything made in Japan was perceived as cheap and of poor quality. Japanese food was only popular in the Japanese community. Very few items, except canned goods, came pre-packaged. Fish, meats, fruits, vegetables, and tofu were delivered daily. The fish counter was manned by professionals who would carve whatever quantity of sashimi you wanted; from a quarter-pound of sashimi to a whole tuna, quartered and filleted.

Changing boundaries

In the 1950s the boundaries of Little Tokyo began to change. The City of Los Angeles took over the north side of East First Street between Los Angeles and San Pedro Streets to build the new central headquarters for the Los Angeles Police Department, later to become known as Parker Center. As the Los Angeles Civic Center continued to expand, more and more whites began coming into Little Tokyo after work while Japanese families moved to outlying communities in the San Fernando Valley and Orange County. They would come to Enbun on weekends to purchase their weekly supply of Japanese groceries.

An annual highlight was preparing for the Oshogatsu grocery shopping. The two weeks preceding New Year's Day were filled with excitement, anxiety and exhaustion. Christmas was an important holiday to everyone, but to those who worked at Enbun, it was a day to rest and recharge your energy for the coming week. Shoppers would purchase large quantities of groceries with many items exclusive to the New Year's feast. Boxes of fresh lobster would be brought in, and none were accepted if there was a broken antenna. Very expensive *kazunoko* (herring roe) was a sought-after delicacy along with *namako* (sea cucumber). *Mochi* was delivered almost hourly from the local confectionaries. Taro and his family

helped the employees stock shelves and package items until late at night in preparation for the following day.

By the 1980s Taro had relocated Enbun to the modern Japanese Village Plaza. Japanese products were no longer viewed as cheap or of poor quality, but it was apparent that many of the families who once came to Enbun had moved further away to more affluent communities. Japanese food was becoming popular and there were larger sections of Japanese groceries appearing in grocery stores like Von's, Lucky's and Ralph's; operating a profitable small store became a challenge. In 1990, a group of employees purchased the store from Taro. It operates today in the Japanese Village Plaza.



Courtesy Steven Kawa

Tofu, *kazunoko*, *mochi*—shoppers found it all at Enbun.

Transformation

The final outcome of this transformation that we have seen through the eyes of Taro Kawa, his store, Enbun, is still being scripted. Whether the store will remain or not seems of little relevance to the overall waves of economic, social changes which are continuing to affect Little Tokyo. The new jewels in the neighborhood are the Japanese American National Museum and other regional cultural facilities, as well as the new religious enclaves that have seen a recent revival of growth through community support. A large recreation facility is also being discussed for possible inclusion in the former neighborhood with the promise of insuring the use of Little Tokyo retail and social services by a new generation of Nikkei families who are now spread throughout the wider LA area. ✨

Steven Kawa is Director of Administrative Services for Santiago Canyon College in Orange. He is the oldest of four children of Taro and Toshiko Kawa who now reside in La Verne, California. He presently lives in West Covina, California. He and his wife Nanci, who contributed to this article, have a continuing interest in family memoirs and his Nikkei community's social history in which his family played an important part.