

JAPANESE AMERICANS AND SCHOOL SEGREGATION

by Sheila Muto

When California became one of the first states to enact a mandatory school attendance law for children in 1874, it did so with a clear racial bias – bias which impacted all children of color, including children of Japanese ancestry.

By the turn of the century, California's Legislature passed several amendments to the California School Law which effectively excluded African, Asian and Native American students from attending public schools with white students.

In 1885, the Legislature amended the law to allow school administrators to "establish separate schools for children of Mongolian or Chinese descent." If separate schools were established, these children "shall not be admitted to any other school." Children of Japanese descent were added to this list in 1921.

While Japanese Americans inherited much of the anti-Asian sentiment that had long been directed against Chinese Americans, the presence of Japanese American children in California public schools did not be-

come a contentious point until the early 20th century, when the Japanese

population dramatically increased (by 1900, 85,438 in the U.S. and Hawaii, 10,151 in California) and native whites saw their growing presence as a threat to their economic and social livelihood.



Eighth grade graduation at segregated Florin Grammar School. Photo courtesy of Mary Tsukamoto.

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During the first three decades of the century, state lawmakers and local education administrators made a few attempts at segregating Japanese American students. Some attempts failed, while others were successful.

The San Francisco Board of Education passed a resolution in 1905 favoring separate schools for Japanese students, yet could not appropriate funds to establish separate facilities. Japanese students continued to attend integrated schools throughout the city until 1906, when the Board ordered all Japanese and Korean

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students to attend a segregated "Oriental School," which had been established in 1885 for Chinese students.

Japanese parents refused to comply and took their complaints to the Japanese Consul General in San Francisco. The Japanese government via the Consul General's Office appealed to the U.S. federal government, asserting that the U.S.-Japan governing treaty accorded Japanese children the right to attend U.S. public schools.

President Theodore Roosevelt came under pressure from Japan to challenge the San Francisco School Board of Education lest relations with Japan be jeopardized. Japan had recently demonstrated its military strength during the 1904 Russo-Japanese War, becoming a formidable contender in world power struggles in East Asia.

The Board reluctantly rescinded its order, but as it applied to Japanese children. In doing so, local politicians and nativist groups received full backing by the U.S. government to restrict further immigration from Japan. This eventually became the provisions under the Gentleman's Agreement. (Lisa Hirai's article, "Race, Citizenship and the Segregation of Japanese Students in San Francisco in 1906", on page 6 covers this in depth.)

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Neither Japanese parents nor organizations contested the school boards' decisions. Some even admitted their shortcomings and were conciliatory toward segregation efforts. The Japanese Deliberative Council president said their children

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were, as white parents saw them, "vulgar in language and uncultured in behavior... This may sound like a concession to the whites... but, first and foremost, we have to improve our own family education."

The Walnut Grove School District was the first to implement public school segregation when it excluded Japanese and Chinese from entering a new school building in 1908. Japanese American children attended an elementary "Oriental School"

until 1942. High schools were integrated, but mostly because it was too costly to support a segregated high school. Nevertheless, segregated grammar schools continued until Japanese Americans were forced into wartime concentration camps during World War II. All schools were desegregated a year later, apparently due to financial considerations.

Rosters of segregated classes for Asians appeared in Isleton in 1910, and in Courtland, segregated classrooms began in 1916.

The Florin School District built a new school for white students in 1921 and the old school became an "Oriental School." Asian children attended separate schools until 1939, when the local Japanese American Citizen's League chapter persuaded the school board to terminate its segregation policy.

Children of Japanese descent living on the West Coast-along with their parents-continued to face segregation when they were forced into wartime concentration camps. In 1945, a Japanese American family challenged the constitutionality of segregated schools, and the Los Angeles County Superior Court concurred that segregation on the basis of race or ancestry violated the 14th Amendment. And in 1947, the California legislature repealed the provisions legalizing the segregation of Japanese, Chinese, and Native American children. ❀

Sheila Muto, former NJAHS board member and staff reporter for Asian Week, is pursuing her graduate degree in journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.

HIROSHIMA

WHY AMERICA DROPPED THE ATOMIC BOMB

Ronald Takaki
(Little, Brown & Co.) 1995

Reviewed by Clifford Uyeda

On this 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima/Nagasaki and the ending of World War II, Americans in almost unison quote President Truman's 1945 justification: "We saved a half a million American lives."

Professor Takaki, as a historian, puts a major emphasis on the reality of race in American culture to explain the decision to drop the bomb. Race has been significant in American history. In Europe, the enemy was identified as Hitler and the Nazis, not the German people. In the Pacific, America's anger was generally aimed at the Japanese people. Unlike the Germans, the Japanese were seen as "apes."

"Truman is the key to understanding why America dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima," says Takaki.

In response to Truman's request the Joint War Plans Committee prepared a report for the Chiefs of Staff in June 1945 which gave the figure 40,000 as the possible number of Americans that would be killed if Japan was invaded. It was this figure that the American Legion objected to in the original Smithsonian script. After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the President had quoted the figure of 500,000 as the estimated Americans killed if Japan had to be invaded.

President Roosevelt had denounced the Japanese air attack on Chunking and also the 1939 Russian bombing of Helsinki. When the German planes bombed London and Coventry, the British retaliated with raids on Germany to terrorize civilians. On February 13-14, 1945, Dresden, an open city full of refugees, was literally leveled by the British. On March 9-10, 1945, Tokyo

was firebombed by the Americans which Brigadier General Bonner Fellers described as "one of the most ruthless and barbaric killings of non-combatants in all history."

Japan and the United States, respectively, had racialized the enemy. Japan was determined to create a Greater East Asia CoProsperity Sphere by barbaric force and racial propaganda. This resulted in the Rape of Nanking, the

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slaughter of 200,000 Chinese civilians and the brutal murders of 7,000 of the 76,000 POWs on the Bataan Death March.

Racism was prevalent in American history since the colonial time. The English colonists often stereotyped the Native Americans as "savages" and "cruel beasts." In 1882, for the first time, the U.S. Congress restricted immigration based on race by passing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Ironically, the Statue of Liberty was erected three years later.

Truman, as a young man of 27, wrote to his future wife, Bess: "I think one

RONALD TAKAKI

Author of *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*

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man is as good as another so long as he is honest and decent and not a nigger or a Chinaman...I am strongly of the opinion that negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America."

As settlers on the Missouri frontier, the Trumans had also been slaveholders. After the Civil War, Truman's mother thought it was "a good thing when Lincoln was shot." Independence, Missouri, was a segregated town. Truman was part of this culture. In 1944, as the vice-presidential candidate, Truman was quoted as saying that if blacks sat at a counter in a drugstore in Independence, "they would be booted out" because "the management had a right to refuse to serve them."

Truman, however, was a complex man. He supported anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation. In 1940 he spoke out against the Klan. After World War II, he desegregated the armed forces. He also issued an executive order for a policy of "fair employment" throughout the Federal establishment." In fact, Truman acquired an impressive

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