From "Tom Brown" to Mykawa Road: The Impact of the Japanese American Community on Houston in the Twentieth Century

By Abbie Salyers Grubb

Shown on the far right amongst his employees, Japanese Nurseries owner Saburo Arai rallied his community and challenged discriminatory legislation following spurts of growth in the Japanese population. Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures.

In 2012 the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University declared Houston to be the most diverse city in the nation, replacing Los Angeles and New York at the top of the list. Of the nearly 2.1 million people in the city, fewer than 130,000 were Asians according to the 2010 Census, with Japanese Americans an even smaller percentage of the city's demographics. And yet, this community has had a significant impact on Houston's development, ranging from business and industry growth to cultural assimilation and street names.

In most history books, an analysis of Japanese American immigration focuses on the West Coast, but Japanese settlers reached Texas as early as the 1880s. According to the U.S. Census, three Japanese immigrants lived in Texas in 1890 and thirteen in 1900, but the numbers grew more quickly after that. By 1910 Texas had nearly 350 Japanese settlers, and by the outbreak of World War II, the number exceeded 450. Many Japanese immigrants entered Texas from the south where they had worked in Mexican mines or on the railroads, and while these early arrivals were often laborers, some established themselves as businessmen or entrepreneurs. Others came to Texas after failed business ventures elsewhere or after tragedies like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Their individual stories, particularly those in the Houston area, reveal the varied origins, motivations, and experiences of the Japanese Texans.

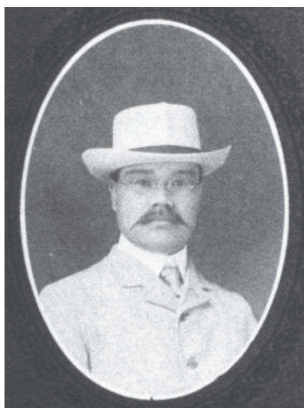
One of these early arrivals was Tsunekichi Okasaki who arrived in the 1890s and was known around Houston as "Tom Brown," the proprietor of the "Japanese Restaurant" at 1111 Congress Avenue in downtown. Ironically, his fare was not rice and traditional Japanese foods but American food. The establishment became quite popular, perhaps because of his low prices even on full-course meals. He later expanded into two more restaurants, founded the Japan Art and Tea Company, and experimented in rice farming. Though one of his businesses burned down and his rice farming efforts failed, Tom Brown was a well-known fixture of Houston until he returned to Japan after World War II.

Rice farming was perhaps the most significant way that Japanese immigrants to the area attempted to establish themselves and their families. In 1902 Japanese Consul General Sadatsuchi Uchida visited Houston and learned that city officials were interested in recruiting Japanese immigrants to grow rice in the region. Uchida convinced former Japanese representative Seito Saibara to lead the colonization of a rice farm around Webster located on the rail line halfway between Galveston and Houston. Saibara purchased over 300 acres for $5,750 and moved there with

The flourishing Houston economy helped establish families like the Kishis. The family was involved in rice and truck farming in Terry County, Texas, and soon discovered oil on their property. Houston remains home to descendants of the Kishi family.
Photo courtesy of UTSA Digital Collection CD#034; 068-3002.

his wife, son, and thirty other families in 1904. The new arrivals cultivated Japanese Shinriki, or God Power rice, which had a higher yield than many other Texas rice breeds.

Though the rice farming and agricultural industries faced difficulties, one local Japanese American man established such a reputation that his name is still recognized by thousands of Houstonians. In 1904 Shinpei Mykawa came to the United States as part of the Japanese delegation to the St. Louis World's Fair, where he learned of the rice-growing efforts in Texas. Two years later he settled south of Houston with four young workers and began cultivating rice. Sadly, just four months into his venture, he was killed in a tragic accident while seeding his fields with a mule-driven seed roller. Though his rice investment failed and two of his followers returned to Japan, the people of Santa Fe renamed the local train station (and the subsequent connecting road) Mykawa in his honor.[1] According to Kasoku Sawada, one of his original employees, the fact that a Texas city named a station for a Japanese man earned the state a positive reputation for many Japanese immigrants of the era. Mykawa was honored with a large granite marker in Houston's Hollywood Cemetery, though it was temporarily removed during World War II at the height of anti-Japanese sentiments.



Early Houstonian Seito Saibara settled in Webster and introduced a dominating Japanese rice breed to rice agriculture.
Photo courtesy of UTSA Digital Collection, CD#803; 095-0600.

The relationships of many of the individual Japanese immigrants with their neighbors and business partners were positive, but a general feeling of distrust towards the Japanese as a group began to increase as their numbers grew. Some families in Texas were refused land by local committees, and the state legislature passed a 1921 Land Law forbidding new arrivals from purchasing land. Saburo Arai, who owned a prosperous nursery in Alvin, led the Texas fight against Land Laws, but he was up against a movement that was spreading with increasing strength across the nation. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act, an anti-immigration bill that effectively halted all Asian immigration and significantly limited entrance by Europeans as well. For men like Seito Saibara, who had envisioned a large-scale rice colony, the new laws ended any hope of future immigration to support his agricultural development. Saibara and his wife moved to Brazil where they started a new rice farm. In 1937 when Saibara fell ill, he had to receive special permission from the State Department to re-enter the country due to the new act.[2] While his endeavors did not pan out as he had hoped, the land that Saibara settled is still a productive rice-growing region of the state today.

For many Japanese Americans already settled in Texas, the new law did not significantly affect them; the existing Japanese communities of Houston, the Rio Grande Valley, and El Paso continued to thrive. However, with the outbreak of war between the United States and Japan sparked by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, immigrants' Japanese heritage raised suspicions with local authorities. Japanese Americans across the country were subject to FBI raids to interrogate them and confiscate contraband items like radios, maps, weapons, and cameras. One local man, Torata Akagi, and his family had their home searched during which the FBI agents smashed their traditional family altar, confiscated a Kodak camera and a child's radio receiver, and taunted Torata's Caucasian wife, Beatrice, for marrying a "Jap." Many Japanese Americans destroyed or hid any items that may imply they had loyalties to Japan, including letters written in Japanese, family china and heirlooms, and samurai swords. Based on lists compiled before the war, thousands of Japanese *Issei*, or first-generation immigrants, were arrested as "enemy aliens" by the FBI and confined to prisons and internment camps run by the Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization

Tsunekichi "Tom Brown" Okasaki's store in downtown Houston sold Japanese wares.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0145-060.

Service (INS). After the search of his home, Torata Akagi and his uncle were briefly imprisoned and released, but his father Fukutaro was held in jail for three months. In a show of faith from his Sheldon-area community, a local friend gathered signed statements from ten different neighbors to present as affidavits in his enemy alien hearing, resulting in Fukutaro's eventual release from jail.

Fear and wartime panic fueled rumors that the remaining Japanese Americans on the West Coast were aiding Japan and would join forces with the Japanese military. In Texas, Japanese Americans were prohibited from traveling extensively or assembling in large groups, and many had their bank accounts frozen. While many Americans of Japanese ancestry were respected and did not suffer either physically or mentally, others felt the pressure to respond to the increasing discrimination. In downtown Houston, shop and restaurant owner Tom Brown changed the name of the "Japanese Restaurant" to "US Café," while another local establishment shifted from "Japan Café" to "Kay's Café." Though Houston did not see as much racial prejudice, anti-Japanese sentiment reached such a fevered pitch in other areas that military and political leaders called for the mass evacuation, relocation, and confinement of all Japanese Americans living along the West Coast.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 allowing for the creation of "Exclusion Zones" near strategic locations from which any or all civilians could be removed as long as their needs were provided for. The order never used the word "Japanese," yet those of Japanese descent were the only ones affected by the new law. In addition to the curfew and contraband laws already in effect, new directions and "Exclusion Orders" were posted in Japanese American communities instructing residents when and where to register and report for removal. The Japanese Americans left behind homes, businesses, pets, and countless personal items, only being allowed to bring what they could carry. Men, women, and children were housed in temporary assembly centers hastily constructed at fairgrounds and racetracks where the inhabitants were forced to live in horse stalls that still bore the odor of their previous residents. By late summer the newly created War Relocation Authority completed construction of ten relocation camps to accommodate the approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans removed from their homes. These families were held unconstitutionally with no criminal charges and no opportunity for a trial despite the fact that over two-thirds of them were American citizens and no Japanese Americans were ever found guilty of espionage or treason.

The Japanese in Texas were not subject to EO 9066 as they were not living within the Exclusion Zone along the West Coast. Those arrested by the FBI in Texas were legal prisoners of the U.S. government based on the Alien Enemies Act of July 6, 1798, still in effect today. Towards the end of the war, as many as 11,000 Japanese, German, and Italian "enemy aliens" from the United States and Latin America had been arrested and imprisoned in camps and prisons across the country from Fort Missoula, Montana, to Ellis Island, New York. Texas became home to three of these prisons in Kenedy, Seagoville, and Crystal City.

Despite the unconstitutional detention of thousands of Japanese Americans, many within the Japanese American community felt the call to enlist in the military to support

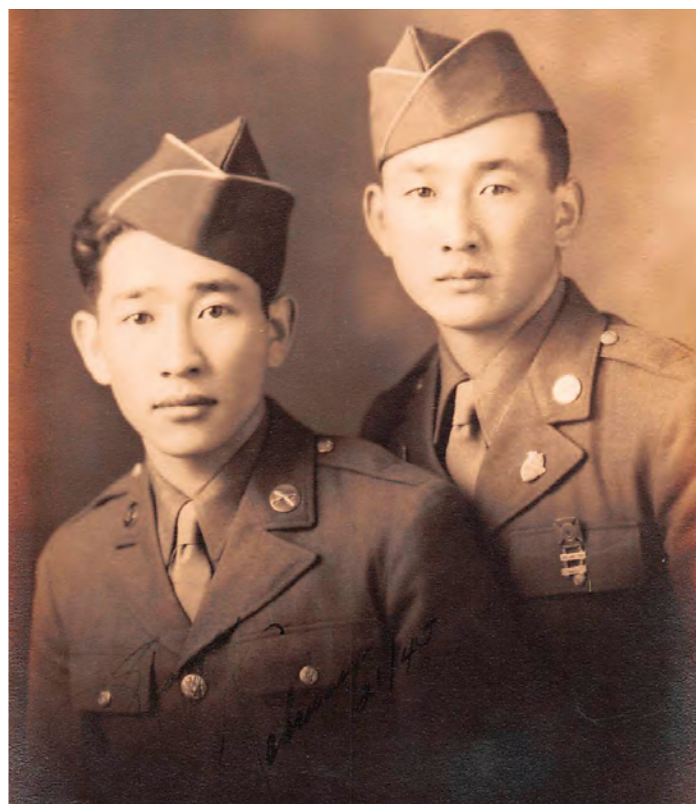
During World War II, Mrs. Sakahara was detained in an internment camp for four years while her husband served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team after a brief internment.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RDGD00503-373.

the war effort and prove their loyalty. Though all Japanese Americans were initially honorably discharged after Pearl Harbor and labelled as 4-C "Enemy Alien[s]," or ineligible for service, President Roosevelt later called for the creation of two all-Japanese American units, the 100th Infantry Battalion (Separate) and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT). The 100th Infantry served honorably through North Africa and into Italy where it was eventually combined with the 442nd RCT. Both units contributed to the liberation of Italy and southern France as well as the fall of Germany. While serving in the Vosges Mountains of southeast France, the Japanese American soldiers helped rescue 211 members of the "Lost Battalion," soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the 141st Regiment, 36th "Texas" Division, who had been surrounded by German troops. In October 1963, Texas Governor John Connally issued a proclamation declaring all members of the 100th/442nd RCT to be Honorary Texas Citizens in appreciation for their role in rescuing the Lost Battalion.

In addition to the service of the infantry in Europe, thousands of other Japanese Americans also served in the Pacific Theater (PTO) as part of the Military Intelligence Service, which offered translation and interpretation to every Allied unit in the PTO. It is said that the service of Japanese American linguists shortened the war by as much as a year, saving over a million American and Japanese lives. The men of the 100th/442nd RCT were similarly honored with the distinction of being the most decorated unit in U.S. military service for their size and length of service with seven total Presidential Unit Citations, twenty-one Medals of Honor, and numerous other individual awards.

Several Houston-area Japanese Americans distinguished themselves with service during the war years as both civilians and soldiers. Kiyoaki Saibara, son of early settler Seito Saibara, used his knowledge of the Japanese language to record broadcasts for the U.S. Army to distribute to the Japanese people. Kiyoaki spoke fondly of his new home, stating, "We Japanese in Texas are able to enjoy all the opportunities offered by this country. We are treated in the same friendly manner as in peacetime. This is the teaching of true Christianity and true democracy. It is indeed remarkable, and more so, it is truly gratifying to know that we live in this country. Furthermore, I have not witnessed any type of race hatred in which the motive was to harm the people of Japanese ancestry." He also mentioned his son Robert, who was serving in the U.S. Army and eventually became the highest ranking Japanese American Army officer during World War II.[3]

In the midst of the famous "Rescue of the Lost Battalion," Houstonian Saburo Tanamachi participated in the last efforts of the 100th/442nd RCT in trying to reach the surrounded Texans. Sadly, it was his death by machine-gun fire that inspired his best friend George "Joe" Sakato to lead a bonsai charge against the German forces, resulting in high Allied casualties but ultimately breaking through the German lines. Tanamachi was one of the first two Japanese Americans to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery and his family still resides in the Houston area.



Brothers George and Harley Fujimoto enlisted to serve in World War II despite the backlash aimed at Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor. George (left) served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and Harley (right) in the Military Intelligence Service.
Photo courtesy of Donna Fujimoto Cole.

Lifelong Houston-area resident Tsutomu "Tommie" Okabayashi (1925-2015) salutes President Barrack Obama after a ceremony to recognize his service in the 442nd RCT.

Photo courtesy of the Okabayashi family.

After the war years of rationing and sacrifice, life regained some sense of normalcy for most of the Japanese Americans in Texas. Relocation and internment camps gradually closed, and families were reunited and able to put their lives back together and rebuild their communities. Between 1940 and 1990 the population of Japanese Americans in Texas increased from 458 to over 15,000, due in part to the number of Japanese "war brides" that returned to the United States with servicemen between 1950 and 1960. While earlier settlements existed primarily in rural areas, many Japanese Americans began to migrate towards urban areas in the latter part of the twentieth century, and by the end of the century, two-thirds of the 15,000 lived in the Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth areas.

Japanese social and cultural organizations and businesses grew, too, providing economic stability and an opportunity to keep their Japanese heritage alive. This has been particularly true in the latter half of the twentieth century as U.S.-Japan trade relations expanded. In the late 1980s, Japan was the top trade partner in dollar volume at the Port of Houston and the third highest export market behind only Canada and Mexico. At that time, the Japanese were also the largest foreign investors in Texas with Houston serving as home to the largest concentration of Japanese businesses and families in the state. Japanese businesses grew so quickly in the 1970s that local residents created the Japanese Educational Institute of Houston to educate the children of Japanese corporate employees who were stationed in Houston. It was these same Japanese businessmen who advocated for and successfully created the Japanese Garden in Hermann Park.

Though there were occasional negative news stories of rising crime rates or political in-fighting, much of the late-twentieth-century news reports about Japanese Americans in Houston were overtly positive, albeit without the political correctness of more recent decades. Many of the newspapers and magazines referred to the Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals as "Orientals," a term which has long since gone out of favor for its perceived connection to the European imperialism of the nineteenth century. Similarly, at least one *Houston Post* article played into the "model minority" myth, stating, "Educators give Asians A's for Achievement." Often seen on the surface as positive praise, the model minority's origins in the midst of the civil rights movement give it an ulterior motive, and the entire idea is based on racial stereotypes, however positive. To combat stereotypes and a lack of historical awareness, delegates from the Houston area testified before the State Board of Education in May 2010 to argue for the inclusion of the World War II Japanese American experience in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements. While the effort failed, it and the growing population have gradually brought about more understanding and awareness of the Japanese American experience.

As a result of progressive changes in the United States, the civil rights movement, and prosperous trade relations with Japan, Japanese Americans have carved out a permanent and significant role in Houston. Japanese Americans have served as political leaders, social advocates, soldiers and heroes, business owners, and voting citizens. Houstonians of all races drive by Mykawa Road daily and indirectly pay homage to one of the founding families of the region. Each April the Japan Festival fills Hermann Park with tens of thousands of visitors celebrating Japanese culture, food, clothing, art, and anime. The Japanese Garden welcomes visitors year round thanks to the generosity of Japanese businessmen who wanted to bring a piece of home to Houston. In the countryside, farms, orchards, and produce companies owe part of their success to their Japanese American predecessors who cleared and cultivated the land and introduced high-yield rice to Texas. Current Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals regularly impact and serve the city through organizations like the Japanese American Citizens League, the Japan America Society–Houston, and the Japan Business Association of Houston. On any given day Houstonians can likely find *teiko* drum lessons, *Ikebana* (flower arranging) classes, Japanese language classes, and (of course) Japanese food at a number of institutions around the city. While the numbers of Japanese Americans in Houston may be small, their contribution to the diverse fabric that weaves together our city is truly historic.

Abbie Salyers Grubb, Ph.D., received her BA from James Madison University and her MA and Ph.D. in history from Rice University. Her dissertation, "The Internment of Memory: Forgetting and Remembering the Japanese American Experience During World War II," traces how the Japanese American confinement and military service were largely ignored in the first decades after World War II but gradually came to light through individual efforts. Active in the local JACL-Houston chapter, Dr. Grubb is an instructor of history and the Honors Program Coordinator at San Jacinto College South Campus.