

Chapter 1

The Issei Legacy

From Entry to Exclusion

TO UNDERSTAND HOW JAPANESE IMMIGRANTS, THE ISSEI, developed political strategies and expressed concerns for the "life chances" of their children, the second-generation Nisei, we must examine the social, political, and economic conditions under which the Issei struggled with their racial position in the United States. Three aspects of the social and economic position of the Issei generation are discussed: 1) their entry into the United States as cheap labor, 2) their changing economic position, and 3) their encounter with racism. Out of these experiences emerged a defensive Issei political style and a particular perspective on the socioeconomic problems facing the Nisei.

Entry to America

Japanese immigration to the United States commenced in the 1860s. In 1868, the first group of contract laborers (141 men, 6 women, and 1 child) went to Hawaii, but the major migration took place between 1885 and 1894 when approximately 30,000 contract workers "were brought to the Hawaiian Islands."¹ Immigration into the U.S. mainland directly from Japan and via Hawaii took place between the turn of the century and the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924. About 245,000 of the 275,000 Japanese who immigrated between 1861 and 1924 entered the United States in that 24-year period, with the majority coming to California.²

Before 1907 Japanese immigrants were predominantly young, single men from farming backgrounds with an equivalent of an eighth-grade education.³ Most of these immigrants thought of themselves as *dekaseginin*, which literally meant "go-out-to-earn people."⁴ The view that the Issei thought of themselves as sojourners who came to America with the basic

purpose of making their fortune and returning home once they had accumulated enough capital was voiced by one Issei:

Generally speaking, when a European emigrant is bidding farewell to his home, his intention is, perhaps, to go to a new land where he can start a new life.... The contrary is true of the Japanese whose only desire is to build a new home, not upon American soil, but in his native land. He desires to save a certain amount of money by a four or five-year struggle, and then, coming back to his own land, to start in business or become an independent farmer.⁵

But the crucial issue is not whether sojourning was the primary reason for immigration; what matters is that some Issei possessed a pragmatic vision—they knew they could earn the equivalent of two Japanese yen for every dollar earned in America. More importantly, they could secure an education in the United States by working their way through school.⁶

For Issei in general, however, their vision of America and their motives for immigrating were shaped within the political and economic context of Japanese society, where their opportunities for social and economic mobility were severely restricted. Land taxes—crucial sources of revenue needed to support Japan's efforts to industrialize at the turn of the century—placed an especially heavy burden on farmers in southern Japan who were key producers in a rice economy. At the same time a population growth spurt coincided with food shortages. These conditions, in what had been a stable social and economic environment, created significant financial hardships for the prefectures in southern Japan and prompted many residents to look to the urban areas and countries like the United States for economic opportunity.⁷

Meanwhile, U.S. capitalist expansion created a demand for cheap labor, first in Hawaii and then on the Pacific Coast, as well as major shifts in California agriculture. Three economic developments in particular affected Japanese immigration. First, during the 1880s, the shift from wheat to fruit production, which resulted from the introduction of new irrigation techniques, signified a major transition in California's economy. As these techniques gained widespread use after 1885, the amount of irrigated acreage increased significantly, as did the need for an additional source of labor.⁸

Second, the completion of the transcontinental railroad and various railroad lines—the Southern Pacific (1881) and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (1885)—incorporated California into the national economy and provided access to eastern markets.⁸ The critical link between California's fruit crops and external markets was the refrigerator car, first introduced in 1888, which allowed fresh fruit and produce to be transported over long distances.⁹

Third, urbanization, which derived from the expansion of manufacturing and the rise of corporate capitalism, helped to increase the demand for fresh produce.¹⁰ The railroads played a significant role in this process by facilitating the movement of settlers to the West Coast. Meanwhile, California became the supplier of fresh fruit and produce for cities throughout the nation. Japanese began to enter in large numbers just as specialized farming became a central feature of California's economy.¹¹

Thus, at the turn of the century, Japanese immigrants filled the increasing demand for cheap labor. Substituting to some degree for Chinese laborers who were excluded as a result of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese worked the fields of the Pacific Coast and soon became the major source of farm labor, numbering as many as 39,000 in the summer of 1909.¹² Issei farm workers were concentrated in the intensive crops which included sugar beets, grapes, fruits, berries, vegetables, and hops.¹³ These crops were seasonal and required Issei labor to be highly mobile. By 1909 Issei labor was vital not only in California but in Idaho, Colorado, Montana, Utah, Washington, and Oregon.¹⁴

Although Japanese laborers were located mainly in the agricultural sectors of the economy, they also worked in the mines of the Rocky Mountains and on the Northern railroads.¹⁵ On the West Coast, they toiled in the canneries, logging camps, meat packing plants, and salt works.¹⁶ For the most part, Japanese immigrants were isolated from the more lucrative trades and the manufacturing jobs. In contrast to the Chinese who had entered manufacturing industries prior to being driven out by white workers in the 1880s, Japanese immigrants were unable to enter cigar, shoe, and garment factories because of anti-Asian sentiments and the monopolization of these jobs by white workers.¹⁷

Issei found work under a contract system in which Japanese bosses acted as intermediaries between their workers and employers. Each boss generally collected a commission from his employer for each worker per day of labor. By handling up to 1,000 workers at peak season, a railroad labor contractor, for example, could easily reap \$100 a day on a commission of merely 10 cents per man.¹⁸

Unwilling to accept their strenuous and exploitive working conditions passively, some Issei workers became involved in labor organizing in order to win better wages and work conditions.¹⁹ As early as 1900, the Japanese Labor League, an organization that had sprung from the Japanese Socialist Revolutionary Party of San Francisco, struggled to free workers from the contract system. Adhering to the ideal of working-class unity, the Labor League recruited some 200 workers. Despite their initial enthusiasm, however, the Labor League did not succeed in its goals because it received a great deal of hostile press coverage as well as acrid criticism from establishment leaders in the Japanese Association. The problem of maintaining

financial solvency compounded the Labor League's problems. But most important, the migratory character of the agricultural workers, coupled with the failure of the white working class to adhere to the principles of international class solidarity, made it virtually impossible for Issei workers to consolidate on a more cohesive basis.²⁰

While the Labor League and its followers pursued class-based politics, numerous Issei workers showed strong antipathy towards labor organizing and union activity. Instead they yearned to become independent growers, which suggests that Issei laborers viewed their role as a transitional phase on the road to becoming petty entrepreneurs. Many struck out on their own, first as tenant farmers and then as small landholders.²¹ This particular economic thrust, according to Modell, was in response to circumstances surrounding and within the Japanese community. The Issei confronted a unique racial situation in Los Angeles, an ambiguous color line that excluded them from some activities but allowed their participation in those which were "important to the economy and to the smooth functioning of business in the area."²² As the economy prospered, Issei leaders embraced an accommodationist strategy that stressed "harmony and cooperation" and the need to earn the respect of white Americans through proper conduct, including Americanization activities, a reduction of behavior deemed deviant by white society, and the self-management of social problems. This response, combined with hard work and perseverance, was economically effective: by the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the Japanese had carved out lucrative niches which were "quite compatible . . . with racial separation."²³ In a similar interpretation, Tetsuya Fujimoto points out that petty enterprise became the key to Issei survival for two important reasons.²⁴ First, the "ideology of white supremacy forced this immigrant group to cope with the techno-economic environment in particular ways, i.e., family-centered small entrepreneurial activity including family operated farms."²⁴ And second, the Issei shift to petty enterprise, particularly small farming, had been made possible by the changing American political economy. In California, the development of irrigation, innovations in transportation, and the rise of cities made intensive agriculture an attractive and necessary alternative for Issei laborers. It was this economic transformation that enabled the Issei to pursue intensive farming.

Changing Economic Position

Between 1900 and 1910, the number of Japanese farmers in California increased from 37 to 1,816, while the total acreage leased jumped from 35,258 to 80,232, and the amount sharecropped expanded from 19,572 to 59,001.²⁵ According to Robert Higgs, wage discrimination and barriers to economic mobility were major reasons that the Japanese moved towards

independent farming, chiefly as tenants and sharecroppers.²⁶ Land leasing enabled large landowners to avoid risks and to secure substantial profits as the Japanese tenant farmers bore the burden of finding the necessary labor to work the land. Also, Issei farmers were willing to pay higher rents for the land than were white farmers.²⁷ Because the Japanese were able to produce higher yields, and thus higher profits, they could afford higher rents. But Higgs suggests other reasons for why white landowners charged the Japanese higher rates. If a large number of landlords were concerned only about their profits, competition for Japanese tenants should have reduced the prevailing "racial rental premium," so Higgs conjectures that the differential rate structure resulted from the persistence of anti-Japanese sentiments during the period 1900–1920. He further suggests that a racial rental premium should have vanished between 1920 and 1940, once the 1924 Immigration Act had been passed. Higgs' hypothesis is provocative and raises the possibility that both economic and racial considerations served the interest of white landowners to treat the Japanese differentially. Higher rents not only meant greater profits and a thriving economy, but also acknowledged the more privileged status of white farmers.

Issei tenant farmers were able to begin operations with little capital because some commission merchants offered financing in exchange for liens upon the crops, and shippers were willing to extend cash credit in order to secure control over certain crops.²⁸ The Issei had little alternative, if they wished to improve their economic standing. They were compelled to cope with poor working conditions to improve their land, and to expend the hand labor needed to grow fruits and vegetables. The demands of specialized farming also required entire families to participate in the production process.²⁹

Between 1910 and 1920, the Issei reached their highest level of agricultural production in California as a result of the wartime prosperity and the demand for food. By 1920, they owned 74,769 acres, cash-leased 192,150 acres, sharecropped 121,000 acres, and contracted 70,137 acres.³⁰ What they produced was valued at \$67 million and represented 30 to 35 percent of California's entire truck crops. They established "a virtual monopoly" on fresh snap beans, celery, and strawberries by 1941.³¹

In the first two decades of the twentieth century Issei urban enterprises also proliferated.³² According to Yamato Ichihashi, the increased number of Japanese immigrants, limited occupational mobility, and discrimination against the Japanese in boarding houses, restaurants, barber shops, and so forth, required that the Japanese develop their own facilities.³³ In San Francisco, for example, "city trades" jumped from 90 to 545 between 1900 and 1909.³⁴ In the city of Stockton, small business establishments rose from 54 to 250 in the period 1909–1920.³⁵ In Seattle, 47 percent of the hotels and 25 percent of the grocery stores were Issei owned and

operated by 1919.³⁶ The most dramatic changes took place in Los Angeles, where the number of businesses increased from 473 in 1909 to 1,806 in 1928.³⁷ This growth also corresponded with the overall expansion in California's economy, especially in Los Angeles after the turn of the century.³⁸

Racial Exclusion

The very presence of Japanese workers as well as their subsequent attempts to secure a foothold in West Coast agriculture raised white fears of economic competition, the loss of white privilege, and the erosion of the myth of white superiority. Issei efforts to fully participate in American life were continually blocked by much of the same exclusionary and social control measures encountered by other racial groups. The efforts to keep these early Japanese in a racially subordinate position took the form of population control, segregation from American political life, and the denial of land ownership. As the targets of these measures, the Japanese experienced a much different reality than white ethnics who immigrated at about the same time.

Population Control

The small size of today's Japanese American population can be traced to earlier immigration policies and statutes shaped by a strong anti-Japanese movement. Unlike the large urban communities which European ethnic groups established in the East Coast and the Midwest, the growth of Japanese immigrant communities had been regulated by the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, which restricted Japanese labor immigration. In response to the decision of the San Francisco Board of Education to segregate Japanese American students, along with Chinese and Korean American students, from white students in 1906, compromise was reached between Japan and the United States, whereby Japanese American students would not be removed from San Francisco public schools if Japan would stop issuing passports to all laborers except those "who have already been in America and to the parents, wives and children of laborers already resident there."³⁹ As a result of the agreement, immigration to the mainland declined sharply for Japanese males. An executive order terminating the entry of Japanese by way of Hawaii, Canada, and Mexico further reduced immigration. The restriction, however, did not apply to *yobiyose* (relatives of settled immigrants), nor did it anticipate the entry of "picture brides." A moderate-sized influx of these two kinds of immigrants and the subsequent rise in the Japanese birthrate caused anti-Japanese labor leaders and politicians on the Pacific Coast to rekindle their exclusionary efforts, culminating in the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act. Arrivals decreased from 4,759 during the 1920-1924 period to 571 in the 1924-1930 period.⁴⁰