

# Japanese Settled in Hawai'i

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The saga of the Japanese-American in Hawai'i begins in a period of time enshrouded in the myths and folklore of the ancient Hawaiian people. The legends of these ancient folk, in chant and song, may have begun at a time when Japanese fishermen were washed ashore in these islands after having been driven from their homeland by typhoons. Did the Hawaiian game *konane* (which resembles checkers) perhaps originate from the similar Japanese game *go*? Did the Hawaiian staff of royalty, the *kahili*, derive from a similar Japanese symbol of authority, the *daimyo*? Was even sugar cane introduced to the Hawaiian islands from Japan? From legend alone, we cannot answer these questions with absolute certainty. But we do know that centuries before the first waves of Japanese immigrants had arrived in Hawai'i in the late 1800's, the great Pacific Ocean had been traversed and two distinct island cultures, each isolated, each evolving separate patterns of lifestyle, had made contact.

The Gannen Mono, or the "first year men", arrived in Hawaii from Yokohama in 1868. They numbered approximately one hundred fifty men and women of diverse background, largely urban dwellers, displaced samurai and an assortment of rogues. Treatment of Gannen Mono in Hawai'i by certain plantations caused a "distasteful impression" in Japan. Japan, therefore, blocked further migration until the Hawaiian government agreed to protect the laborers. It was not until seventeen years later, in 1885, after extended negotiations, that attempts to rejuvenate Japanese immigration proved successful. In February of that year the steamer *City of Tokio* brought nearly nine hundred Japanese immigrants to Hawai'i. Mostly young, single males working under three-year binding contracts, they came with the intention of making their fortunes in "Golden Hawai'i" and returning to Japan with status and wealth.

These immigrants were the first of what would become wave after wave of *Issei*, the first generation. Each *Issei* group was as anxious as the next to find new wealth in Hawai'i. By 1924 so many Japanese had come to the islands that they constituted over 40% of the

population. Working for low wages in the sugar and pineapple fields, day-after-day, year-after-year, hauling, cutting, slashing and burning cane, the Issei gave their muscles, blood and sweat to buttress the great plantation fortunes.

Their lives were contained within the boundaries of their plantation camps. Yet even in the midst of poverty, a sense of community, a sense of pride and permanency began to be articulated. Picture bride marriages were arranged so as to perpetuate the traditional Japanese family. *Nisei* women, crossing an ocean to meet husbands they had never known, began not only to serve the home and give birth to the Nisei, the second generation, but to work alongside their husbands in the fields.

The early years of the Nisei were a complex period of cultural growth and "finding oneself". At home the second generation learned filial piety, respect for the family and the simple virtues of Japanese behavior, at Japanese language school they learned to speak the language of their parents. And in American public school, from the radio and movies, from other non-Japanese of all races, they learned goals of justice, equality, opportunity and the unique blending of ethnic cultures and pidgin language known as the local lifestyle.

War interrupted the education of the Nisei, as it did almost all aspects of life in Hawai'i. The Japanese bombs that fell on Pearl Harbor that day in 1941 caused many sacrifices for Japanese-Americans.

Sacrifices are made only with a commitment. After World War II the Japanese-American Nisei were committed to provide for themselves and their families a secure, equal place in the island society. The war had wrought unprecedented changes in Hawai'i's political and economic structures and the *Nisei* sought to capitalize upon those changes. The educational level of the *Nisei* climbed as returning veterans took advantage of the GI Bill. A growing tourist industry in the post-war years offered jobs and business expansion. Nisei men and women swelled the ranks of professional occupations - doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers or engineers.

In 1954, the Democratic party, comprised largely of *Nisei* politicians, took control of both Houses of the Territorial Legislature. From then until the present, the *Nisei* would play a major political role in the emergence of a modern Hawai'i responsive to ethnic ambitions for all people.

Political success is in many ways the symbolic culmination of the Japanese American saga - of the Imi's plantation experience, the wartime sacrifices, and the post-war striving for acceptance and success by the *Nisei*. But the Japanese American drama has not been totally played out. The *Sansei* and *Yonsei*, the third and fourth generations, are beginning their own chapter of the Japanese-American story. They stand at the precipice of history, realizing that past accomplishments and cultural pride can sustain but cannot guide a generation. They search for new meanings and new values beyond their ethnic background, realizing that their human values and outlooks are being blended into an evolving multicultural Hawai'i lifestyle.

### Discussion Questions

- 1) Historians of immigration history use the concept of Push-Pull Factors to better understand the immigrant experience. What factors "pushed" or motivated Japanese men and women to leave home and what other factors "pulled" them to settle in Hawaii in the late 1800s? Do you think they were successful?
  
- 2) Gender roles are deeply culturally-rooted. How were Japanese gender roles both maintained and challenged by the immigration experience to Hawaii?