

# Americanism and Citizenship: Japanese American Youth Culture of the 1930s

Susan Hasegawa

In a 1936 essay contest sponsored by the American Legion, Point Loma High School student May Sakamoto won first prize with an essay entitled “Americanism.” Sakamoto, an American born citizen of immigrant Japanese (Issei) parents, described Americanism as a “deep loyalty and love of country in our hearts, not only because we are American citizens, but because we are attached to American ideals and government.” She went on to highlight positive contributions of Japanese Americans (or Nikkei) to American society. These contributions included second generation Japanese Americans (or Nisei) forming international clubs on school campuses and military service by Japanese Americans for their adopted country. She noted that Japanese immigrants had fought in World War I and that they later formed the Japanese American Legion called the Perry Post (probably named after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry, who opened Japan to the West in 1854). While Sakamoto described Japanese American loyalty to America, she also noted that the Nisei had a special role. They were the generation that bridged the divide between the Issei (who were prohibited from becoming



*Japanese gather at the Hotel del Coronado, 1914. © San Diego Historical Society. No. 12296*

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*Japanese Vegetable Growers Market, 1919. © SDHS #13721-25.*

naturalized U.S. citizens) and the mainstream American population. In her words, the Nisei served as a “mediator of two civilizations.”<sup>1</sup>

During the 1930s, young Nisei, such as Sakamoto, created their own definition of what it meant to be an American. They pledged loyalty to the United States and embraced many aspects of dominant American culture while at the same time remaining supportive of the older Issei generation and serving as mediators between Japanese and American cultures. In other words, during the 1930s these Nisei invented and created space for a distinctive Japanese American youth culture in Southern California. Nisei did this by forming their own youth organizations, sponsoring their own community activities, and writing and publishing their own newsletter, *The Southern Blue Page*.

The first documented Japanese immigrants came to San Diego in the late 1880s. They worked as track crews on the local railroad, as farmers in Chula Vista, Lemon Grove, and La Mesa, and as laborers in the San Diego Bay salt fields. In the early twentieth century, Japanese immigrants would also become heavily involved in the fishing industry, and by the 1920s, Nikkei families had settled throughout rural San Diego County and in the southern part of downtown San Diego.<sup>2</sup>

The perpetuation of the Japanese American community depended on the picture bride system, which enabled Issei bachelors living in San Diego to marry Japanese brides. Go-betweens or matchmakers chose Japanese brides for prospective grooms. But unlike traditional arranged marriages, the matching process was completed not through face-to-face meetings but through photographs and letters. After a successful match, the Japanese bride, who frequently had little or no English language skills, sailed for America. After coming through Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco, she met her husband, usually for the very first time.<sup>3</sup>

To forge community among Japanese immigrants in San Diego, the Issei formed prefectural (or regional) organizations, temples, and religious groups. The most important secular organization was the Japanese Association, which was formed in 1906. The Japanese Association fostered strong ties with Japan, sponsored Japanese sports (such as sumo wrestling), and cultural events, such as the showing of Japanese language movies.<sup>4</sup>

As Issei farmers became prosperous, they also faced growing opposition from white farmers and politicians who sought to limit their competitiveness. In 1913, California enacted its first Alien Land Law. The law prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from purchasing land and limited land leases to three years. In 1920, the California legislature updated the law to close the loopholes that had made it possible for some Nikkei to purchase land. Although the Alien Land Laws made it difficult for Issei farmers, they devised methods to secure land and increase acreage needed for farming. One of the most popular methods of overcoming the Alien Land Laws was naming American-born children as owners on land deeds. Another strategy was acquiring land with the help of white or Nisei partners.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1900s, California fanned the fires of a national anti-Japanese movement and successfully pushed for tighter restrictions on Japanese immigrants. In the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908, Japan restricted the migration of Japanese laborers to the United States and the U.S. prohibited Japanese laborers from entering the United States. Picture brides, however, were not covered by this agreement. But with the growing number of picture brides and the formation of more Nikkei families, exclusionist forces in 1920 moved to stop the immigration of Japanese women. The Cable Act of 1922 went even further, stripping U.S. citizenship from Nisei women who married Issei men. The backlash against Japanese immigrants was part of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment that



*Nisei formed Seinen-kai (student associations) both in schools and in the community. This 1941 Wakayama Seinen-kai gathering in Balboa Park hosted student representatives from around the state, Tijuana, and possibly even Tokyo, Japan. Note the Tokyo sign in the far left of the photo and Tijuana sign in the middle of the photo. © Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego (JAHSSD).*



*Nisei women relax at a San Diego beach in 1939. © JAHSSD.*

reached an apex in the 1920s. In the wake of World War I, nativist fears, and the first red scare, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924. In addition to setting strict quotas on new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, the federal legislation completely banned Japanese immigrants from entering the country.<sup>6</sup>

Within this context of exclusion and racism, the Nisei generation came of age. They grew up in traditional Japanese households, attended Japanese language schools, and participated in Nikkei community activities, but, as adolescents and young adults, these Nisei ultimately created a culture very different than that of their parents. While the Issei enjoyed Japanese

cultural and sporting activities, the Nisei were largely drawn to mainstream American activities. They followed American fashion fads and played American sports, such as baseball. Many participated in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and to accommodate Nisei interest in this American institution, the Japanese Buddhist temple sponsored a Boy Scout troop during the 1930s. In 1935, the first Japanese American in San Diego (Motoharu Asakawa) achieved the Eagle Scout award.<sup>7</sup>

Nisei youth also exerted their independence from the older generation by forming youth-centered organizations in the public education system. For example, the Seinen-Kai at San Diego High School was a coeducational club promoting friendship “among Japanese American students.” Started in 1932, Seinen-Kai sponsored a faculty tea, skating parties, and recreational outings to the beach and mountains. Nisei students publicized club activities on the main school bulletin board. Importantly, in 1940 they proclaimed their loyalty to America by announcing the purchase of a United States bond instead of making their standard \$25 club contribution to the school scholarship fund. In Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, on baseball teams, and in organizations such as the Seinen-Kai, Nisei youth and young adults were forming social networks focusing on their priorities, and forging a separate Japanese American youth culture.<sup>8</sup>



*Obayashi House, San Diego. © San Diego Historical Society No. 13721*



*Nippon Company, c. 1930s. © San Diego Historical Society. 13721-11.*

This newly emerging Japanese American youth culture could be seen plainly on the pages of *The Southern Blue Page*, a weekly Nisei newspaper published during the Great Depression. The newspaper obtained financial funding from both Nikkei and non-Nikkei sponsors, as well as individual subscriptions. Early 1936 editions included sponsorship by Miss Mary Ishino, a nurse at Mercy Hospital, Roy Hanaoka of Brawley, Susie Mukai of Spring Valley, Central Park Shoe Shop under the ownership of Mike De Turi, and Miss Anness Sloss, a singing teacher. The last two names obviously were not Japanese Americans, but they probably had a substantial clientele of Nikkei families. In fact, Central Park Shoe Shop seemed to be a consistent advertiser during the



*Nisei Florence Asakawa and her sister pose for a formal graduation photo taken in the 1930s. © JAHSSD.*

life of the paper. Nikkei attendees looking for footwear for socials and semi-formals surely patronized Central Park Shoe Shop. The paper, which in the mid 1930s circulated 300-500 copies per week, stated its intention: to “create a true and strong Japanese American spirit that is distinctively San Diego’s and Imperial Valley’s which would harmonize in the social machines of our country.”<sup>9</sup>



*Although baseball was much more popular in the Nikkei community, a handful of Japanese American men played organized football, c. 1930s. © JAHSSD*

The ambitious staff of *The Southern Blue Page* had a vision of a united Nikkei community here in the southernmost region of California. An interesting aspect of the newsletter was its attempts at



*Nisei boys and young men were active participants in Boy Scouts. Moto Asakawa (pictured second row, first from left) was a leader for this Nisei boy scout camping trip (c. 1930s). © JAHSSD.*

geographical inclusiveness. It was based in Logan Heights and reported on events and activities of the Nikkei community from North County to the Mexico border. The intrepid editors also sought out stories from the far corners of the region, with reports from Brawley, El Centro, and Calexico. Readers heard of Brawley's post-Christmas dance headed by committee chair Tsuyako Morita, and the local junior college's Di Gamma Japanese dinner organized by Toshiko Hamai, Suma Taira, Taka Aisawa, and Yone Tamaki. The El Centro Young Men's and Women's Buddhist Association (YMWBA) planned a farewell outing for Mr. M. Okita, a teacher at the Buddhist Church who was moving to San Luis Obispo. Calexico's Japanese Boy Scout Troop 20 of Holtville celebrated a banquet in November 1936. These stories brought together readers from all parts of San Diego and Imperial Counties. Editors worked diligently to bring together towns separated by geography during the Great Depression and celebrate successes and victories of the Nikkei community.

A distinctive Japanese American youth culture can also be seen in the formation of the San Diego chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). The national JACL (founded in 1930) acknowledged on-going discrimination and challenged racist laws, especially the Cable Act. But unlike Issei organizations, such as the Japanese Association, the chief aim of the JACL was political and cultural Americanization. The first sentence of the JACL creed (written in 1940) stated: "I am proud that I am an American citizen of Japanese ancestry, for my very background makes me appreciate more fully the wonderful advantages of this nation." The creed also urged members to prove



*Young people listened to the latest popular music and attended community dances c. 1930s. © JAHSSD.*



*Group of Nisei girls pose for a photo on the football field. © JAHSSD.*

themselves “worthy of equal treatment and consideration.” Despite (or perhaps because of) hostility from the dominant culture, the Nisei wholeheartedly embraced American ideals and engaged in what scholars Roger Daniels and Harry Kitano call “hypernationalism.”<sup>10</sup>

The San Diego chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (founded in 1933) shared the national organization’s focus on acculturation and assimilation into American society. The major emphasis of the San Diego chapter was loyalty to the United States, participation in the American political process, and the fostering of friendship between the Nikkei community and mainstream America. Given clear hostility toward the Nikkei community, the San Diego Nisei had to tread very lightly outside of their ethnic community.<sup>11</sup>



*A 1931 community picnic in Chula Vista included both sumo (traditional Japanese wrestling) and baseball as part of the festivities. © JAHSSD.*

The issue of Nisei dual citizenship, Japanese and American, was a hot topic for the local JACL. Before 1924, Japan considered American children born of Issei as citizens of Japan. The Nisei were thus dual citizens. In 1924, Japan changed its law. Issei parents now had to register their infant within fourteen days of birth to obtain Japanese citizenship for the child. At the same time, Nisei with dual citizenship could now renounce their Japanese citizenship if they filed the appropriate paperwork. San Diego JACL President George Ohashi and other cabinet members pushed Nisei to become totally American and to give up their Japanese citizenship. Since dual citizenship was a factor in branding the Japanese American community as disloyal during World War II, it was prescient that young leaders urged citizens to cut official ties to the nation of Japan.<sup>12</sup>

Not only did the local Japanese American Citizens League encourage young Japanese Americans to renounce their Japanese citizenship, but the organization called on Nisei to fully participate in American politics. In September 1936, for instance, the JACL called on young Japanese Americans to register to vote so that they could fully participate in the upcoming American presidential election.<sup>13</sup>

The San Diego Chapter of the JACL was popular among Nisei youth and it was quite active. President Ohashi organized aggressive regional membership campaigns and recruited over a hundred new members by 1936. The San Diego group also played an active role in the national JACL organization. In the summer of 1936, the chapter sent Pol Nakadate to the National Convention held in Seattle. He returned with a scathing report to the local cabinet. The local chapter in turn called for greater accountability of national finances and objected to the unexplained travel expenses of national officers. The San Diego cabinet issued an ominous threat to “drop out” if relevant information was not distributed in a timely manner from the national office. San Diegans such as Pol Nakadate, George Ohashi, and other cabinet members were outspoken in their criticism and demanded monthly financial statements at both the national and local level.<sup>14</sup>

Nisei youth organizations, such as the Seinen-Kai and the San Diego branch of the Japanese American Citizens League, were very different than the organizations founded by the Issei. Prefectural organizations and groups such as the San Diego Japanese Association were very much oriented toward remembering Japan and maintaining Japanese culture and language in America. In contrast, Japanese American youth frequently renounced their Japanese citizenship, pledged loyalty to the United States, participated in the American political system, embraced American culture (such as baseball, scouting, and fashion), and spoke and wrote to their friends in English. Another important difference between the two generations was the place of women. In contrast to the male-dominated Issei organizations, women played a greater role in leading Nisei organizations. Hanako Moriyama, a young Nisei woman, presided as the temporary chair during the formation of the San Diego chapter of the JACL.



*Mrs. Doi and Frank Doi hold U.S. war bonds, December 29, 1941. © San Diego Historical Society UT 3736*

Furthermore, women comprised five of the eight officers installed in a JACL ceremony in September 1933. Female leadership signaled a decided change from the traditional gender-based structure of the Issei group, such as the prefectural organizations, the Japanese Association, and various religious groups.<sup>15</sup>

During the 1930s, the Nisei asserted their independence, which resulted in a cultural gap between the Issei and their children. But despite this assertion, Japanese American youth such as May Sakamoto also understood the importance of serving as mediators. While forming a distinct Japanese American youth culture, most young Japanese Americans still expressed respect for and deference to their elders. At many cultural

events, Japanese and Japanese American cultures peacefully co-existed, such as at a 1931 Chula Vista picnic where traditional Japanese sumo wrestlers and Japanese American baseball players posed together for a photograph. JACL events also incorporated the Issei. For instance, at the inaugural reception of the JACL, the chapter invited two officers from the Japanese Association to speak. The fact that the reception was held at the Buddhist Temple of San Diego also illustrates continued respect for hierarchy and the older generation.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, *The Southern Blue Page* editors appealed to Issei readers by occasionally publishing sections in Japanese. The editors appealed to young people's economic obligations to the Issei generation. The newspaper made it clear to young people that it was important during a national emergency with double-digit unemployment to patronize the stores owned by the older generation. For instance, an August 1936 editorial proclaims that the Isseis "are reaching a crisis! Their customers are Japanese, and in the decreasing population of isseis and a tendency of niseis to buy American, their business in time would fade out." But the editorial also depicted Nisei grievances with these businesses. The last part of the editorial stated, "but there is one thing that must be abolished before the niseis will buy from Japanese stores: the treatment of nisei customers by issei clerks must be improved, and personal criticism in the form of personal gossip must be abolished." While the Nisei editors rallied the community to ethnic economic solidarity, people like the editors also wanted simple respect for their efforts.<sup>17</sup>

The closing paragraphs of May Sakamoto's winning essay expressed the following on the domestic situation and foreign policy: "Even though America is menaced by unemployment, and other perils besides the ones we have now, there is always the strong under-current of Americanism which overpowers them and keeps the country from fears of any kind of civil war." She also commented on America's inner strength: "Although America is not in the League



Sam Fujita and Frank Otsuka, January 30, 1942. © San Diego Historical Society. UT 3737

of Nations, she has enough will power from the mass of people to stay out of war and maintain peace. The thing which keeps America out of war is, I believe, the strong and independent international policy of the American government." May Sakamoto's youthful optimism for peaceful international relations would soon be shattered as Japan and the United States advanced down the road to war. Despite Nisei attempts to carve out a Japanese American presence that focused on "Americanism," the American public would only see the Japanese part during World War II.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. May Sakamoto, "Americanism," *The Southern Blue Page*, 1 January 1937. In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Ozawa v. U.S.*, that Japanese nationals were ineligible for U.S. citizenship based upon the Naturalization Act of 1790, which limited citizenship for the foreign-born to free white persons.
2. Donald Estes, "Before the War," *The Journal of San Diego History* 24 (Fall 1978): 426. Donald Estes, *South Bay Monogatari: Tales of the South Bay Nikkei Community* (San Diego: Tecolote Publications, 1996), 5.
3. *Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1968 to the Present*, 1993, ed., s.v. "Picture Brides."
4. Sakiko Akita, "Japanese American Associations in San Diego: An Examination of Their Persistence" (M.A. thesis, San Diego State University, 1976), 103; Matthew Estes, "The Relocation and Internment of San Diego's Nikkei Community" (master's thesis, San Diego State University, 1995), 26-27.
5. See Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 227. See also Bruce Castleman, "The California Alien Land Laws" (M.A. thesis, University of San Diego, 1993).
6. *Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1968 to the Present*, 1993, ed., s.v. "Gentlemen's Agreement"; *Japanese American History*, s.v. "Picture Brides"; *Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1968 to the Present*, 1993, ed., s.v. "Cable Act."
7. Motoharu Asakawa, interview by Donald Estes, 23 December 1997, interview transcript, Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego, San Diego, CA.
8. Gray Castle, *San Diego High School Yearbook* (San Diego: San Diego High School, 1940), 20.
9. Yo Kuyama donated her personal collection of *The Southern Blue Page* to the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego (JAHSSD) (see jahssd.org for more information). Yo Kuyama's late husband, Paul, was one of many young Nisei who worked energetically at creating a cohesive Japanese American community in the San Diego and Imperial County region.
10. Roger Daniels and Harry Kitano, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 181.
11. *San Diego Union*, 17 September 1933.
12. *Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1968 to the Present*, 1993 ed., s.v. "Dual Citizenship." "San Diego JACL Gets Active," *The Southern Blue Page*, 5 July 1936. "JACL Looks Forward to '37," *The Southern Blue Page*, 15 November 1936.
13. *The Southern Blue Page*, 27 September 1936.
14. Pol Nakadate, "J.A.C.L. Cabinet Makes Big Move," *The Southern Blue Page*, 4 August 1936.
15. *San Diego Union*, 27 August 1933. *San Diego Union*, 17 September 1933.
16. *San Diego Union*, 17 September 1933.
17. *The Southern Blue Page*, 23 August 1936.
18. Sakamoto, "Americanism," *The Southern Blue Page*, 1 January 1937.