

OTHER FACES, OTHER LIVES - ASIAN AMERICANS IN IDAHO

Idaho - one of the most rugged and beautiful Northwestern states. We picture its past peopled by Native Americans and white explorers, settlers and pioneers. Little is ever said about other races. However, Asians have played an important part in working the mines, constructing the railroads, cultivating the farms, establishing the businesses, teaching the children and helping to build this great western state.

Although there is occasional mention of Chinese miners, few people realize that in 1870, during Idaho's gold rush, over one fourth of the people in Idaho were Chinese, and that Boise, the population center, was one-third Chinese. Though many whites tried to treat the Chinese miners, farmers and business people fairly, the story of the early Chinese in Idaho was laced with suspicion, prejudice and discrimination.

The once large Chinatown located in Boise is now gone, but the Chinese have had a continuous presence in Idaho from the time of statehood to the present day.

The Japanese came to Idaho starting in the 1880's to work on the railroad. Many stayed to farm and then branched out into other occupations. But we seldom talk about the fact that in 1943, the eight largest population center in Idaho was Camp Minidoka, a Japanese Internment Camp in the desert north of Twin Falls. Thousands of Japanese Americans were brought there after being forced from their homes on the West Coast. Living in hastily constructed bare and crowded barracks, they did their best to make the area livable by cultivating gardens to literally "make the desert bloom."

The story continues to the present day as Filipinos and Southeast Asians come to Idaho looking for a better life. Like the earlier Asians, they try hard to fit into an unfamiliar, often unfriendly environment, while at the same time remaining true to their heritage and beliefs. These brave and hard-working Asians show us all "other faces of Idaho."

This program of "Other Faces, Other Lives" was made by people of Chinese, Japanese and Filipino ancestry who are members of the Palouse Asian American Association of northern Idaho - eastern Washington as a project supported by the Idaho Centennial Commission Ethnic Heritage Committee. They travelled the state to uncover some of the unwritten and untold stories of what it was like and is like to be Asian American in Idaho.

Do the Asians blend in, or do they maintain their own culture? How do they raise their children? How are they treated by their white neighbors? Do they feel at home in Idaho? Are things changing for the better for them? How do children feel who are often the only Asians in their class or school? Listen in as we raise these questions in interviews and discussions and learn about an often neglected part of the story of Idaho.

Marie Lee Lew came to the United States from China when she was 16 years old. She was the first Asian to graduate from the University of Idaho. In Spokane, her father was a Chinese herb doctor. In 1926, the family moved to Moscow, Idaho where they were the first Chinese family to settle as permanent residents. Her family owned and operated the Grill Cafe, which is now the Old Hong Kong restaurant on Main Street. Marie married Mi Lew and they raised five children. Two of their daughters, Merry Lew and Claire Chin are currently teachers in nearby towns. In the 1920's, gaining the acceptance of the white community was difficult, and to this day the Lews and Chins face occasional prejudice. But Marie, and her family have found that their Chinese values of strong family unity and hard work have helped them to find a true home in Moscow, Idaho.

People who see the Suenaga family shopping at the mall in Pocatello or fishing for trout on Henry's Fork probably do not realize that they are descended from samurais of ancient Japan. Now Richard Suenaga's young grandson, Richard II, learns the ancient Japanese martial arts in Pocatello, Idaho. Richard's start in Idaho was a bitter one. Even though he was a second generation American, Richard had to face hatred, and suspicion during World War II. Eventually his hard work and dependability triumphed. He established Suenaga Masonry, now run by his son, Hugh, who is active in community affairs. His wife, Mary Kasai, a former dancer who was born and raised in Idaho, has introduced thousands of Pocatello children to the art of dance. She has taught dance classes throughout the country including Los Angeles, Houston, Las Vegas, San Francisco and Houston.

Paul and Sanaye Okamura have lived in the Pocatello area all their lives. Paul is a retired farmer, having taken over his father's truck gardening business. His father was killed in an accident while helping a neighbor put out a fire. Sanaye is a retired elementary school teacher. She is quite proud of her teaching record and pleased that she received kind words from her former students and their parents. The Okamuras were founding members of the Pocatello chapter of the JACL - the Japanese

American Citizens League. The Pocatello chapter was established in 1940 and Paul Okamura was president in 1941 when it received its charter. One of the slogans of the JACL is "Better Americans in a greater America." Today, the JACL has 900 members in the Intermountain District of Utah and Idaho and 113 chapters nationwide.

Seiji Hayashita was brought to Idaho during World War II when he was ordered from his farm in Bellevue, Washington and relocated in the Minidoka Internment Camp. After the war, Seiji settled in the Nampa area. He eventually became the first Japanese American bowling center proprietor in the State of Idaho and possibly in the United States. His son, who was born in the internment camp, is the first Asian American teacher in the Nampa school system and was recently voted outstanding educator. For many years, Seiji did not speak of his experiences at the Internment Camp, but now he feels it is important that the story be told and remembered. He was one of those instrumental in the Idaho Centennial project establishing a memorial and plaque at the site of the Minidoka Camp, and he was present at the ground breaking ceremony there.

Filipino Americans are often called the "invisible minority." They seldom congregate in special neighborhoods like Chinatowns, and Little Tokyos as their Chinese and Japanese counterparts often did. Unlike the Chinese and Japanese, early Filipino immigrants came from a territory of the U. S. and they were brought up saluting and pledging allegiance to the American flag in grade school. The first Filipinos to come to the U. S. mainland in the 1920s were mainly farm laborers and house servants, but latter day immigrants are largely college educated and are most prominent in service fields such as medicine, engineering and administration.

The sense of isolation and the struggle between tradition and assimilation that we have heard about in the interviews with Chinese and Japanese families were evident also in our visit with the Callaos, a Filipino couple who moved to Boise, Idaho from California to be near their son at the Mountain Home Air Force Base. Until their retirement, the Callaos were active in church ministries.

Early Asian settlers came to America to make their fortunes and start new lives. They did not find the streets lined with gold, but they did find the streets lined with opportunities. After the first generations established themselves, they look to education to help give their children better lives.

The various Asian groups have different views on intermarriage. Although many of the first generation Asians strongly preferred their children to marry within their respective groups, life in America has led to many intermarriages. Succeeding generations have had to struggle to reconcile their parents' values with the realities of life in Idaho.

All Asian groups have experienced forms of discrimination. In early days there were laws preventing Asians from becoming citizens and owning land. Prejudice was extreme against the Japanese Americans during World War II. An unfortunate example of this was the construction of Camp Minidoka, where thousands of Japanese Americans were interned, their land and possessions taken away by the U. S. government.

As time goes on, Asian families have had to compromise between maintaining the traditions of the past and adjusting to the culture of the present. Each group, each family, and each individual must find a comfortable balance between these two forces.

America has often been called the "melting pot" where immigrants from all over the world assimilate into the American society, losing their original cultural ties. Our interviews with the Asian Americans of Idaho fit better with a more recently proposed metaphor of a tossed salad, where each element retains its own distinct flavor, but all combine into a single, delicious experience.

Certainly Idaho has been richer because of the contributions and hard work of its Asian Americans. Obtaining acceptance and recognition has not been easy for them. But in spite of the struggles of starting life over in a strange land and the pain of the prejudice they have had to face, the people we spoke with place a high value on the beauty and advantages of the state in which they live. In all our interview, we heard the constant theme that "Idaho is my home."