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INTRODUCTION



This book is about a people from a rocky string of islands who journeyed eastward across the vast Pacific Ocean and came to Colorado in search of a future for themselves and their children. It is the one-hundred-year history—a significant, warm, and sometimes sad story of hardships, defeats, and successes, of laughter, tears, and ultimate triumphs—of Colorado’s Japanese Americans.

The book can trace its origins to one October day in 2003 when my friend Kimiko Side came to see me in her role as president of a public service organization, the Japanese Association of Colorado. She told me the association would be observing the one hundredth anniversary of its founding and a committee had come up with the idea of publishing a book about its history.

And, she said, the association wanted me to write the book.

Why me? I have lived in Colorado for more than fifty years but

never paid much attention to the Japanese Association. Too many other things to do.

But, she argued, you are a writer.

Well, yes, sort of.

And, she went on, we are not thinking of a book about the association itself. We're thinking about the people, the Coloradans from Japan and their descendants, the story of their experiences. In other words, a human story.

That was more interesting. Go on, I said.

Among your books, Kimiko continued, was *Nisei*, which did a beautiful job of telling about the Japanese American people in the whole country. Why not a book specifically about Japanese Americans in Colorado—who they were and what they did and why they did the things they did and the problems they faced as Coloradans and how they overcame them?

Interesting idea.

Nisei was the first of about a dozen books I have written, some of which were on the Japanese American experience. *Nisei* had focused on the people in the West Coast states, where perhaps 90 percent of Japanese Americans were living in 1941. It told of their travails during World War II when they were hustled into U.S.-style concentration camps as a result of the federal government's hysterical and tragic assumption that race equated mass disloyalty. Kimiko pointed out that there wasn't much in *Nisei*, or any other book, about the experience of Japanese Americans in the interior of the country and suggested it was time their story be told.

What was their story?

The vast majority of Japanese immigrants eventually had settled in California and Washington with a smaller number in Oregon. But on their arrival, with no knowledge of the English language or Ameri-

can ways, the first jobs for approximately one-third of them were working as unskilled laborers in the inland West maintaining the railroads that stretched to the endless horizon. Not many remained in these jobs for long. The deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah were too hot; winters in Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, too fiercely cold for youths from the temperate Japanese homeland. Seeing only a bleak and unpromising future in these states, most headed back to sink their roots near the coast. Only the hardiest few remained inland. Eventually they started farms, which required little in capital but much hard work and love of the soil, and began families.

In 1940, just before tension between Japan and the United States flared into war in the Pacific, the federal census showed 126,947 “Japanese” in the United States, not including Hawaii, which had yet to achieve statehood. Of those, 79,642 were American-born, American-educated Nisei who were U.S. citizens by birth. And 47,305 were Issei of the immigrant generation who remained aliens because the law denied the privilege of naturalization to Asians. Their numbers were never replenished because of the 1924 ban on further immigration from Asia. California was home of the largest number by far of ethnic Japanese. Colorado’s Japanese population had not grown significantly since the 1910 census when 2,300 were shown to be in the state with fewer than 600 in Denver. After 1910 the total was relatively stable as Nisei replaced the dwindling number of Issei.

Although the American-born became the majority, they as a group were young and inexperienced in 1940. On the West Coast as well as in Colorado the communities continued to be dominated by the elders. Thus perhaps it was inevitable that, yielding to the fears of the military and the latent anti-Asian hostility of much of the West Coast’s establishment, President Franklin D. Roosevelt should sign Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, six weeks after the outbreak

of war. It authorized the military in the name of national security to establish zones from which “any or all persons of Japanese ancestry, alien and non-alien” could be excluded, “non-alien” being a cruel euphemism for “citizen.” At the time and to the dismay of Japanese Americans, there was virtually no public protest against the arbitrary suspension of the rights of certain Americans based on their ethnicity.

The prohibited zones included the southern half of Arizona, all of California, the western halves of Oregon and Washington, and all of Alaska. And because there was no place for the evacuees to go, concentration camps to house them (euphemistically called “relocation centers”) were built hurriedly in the sparsely populated interior. One of the camps was in Colorado and its story is part of this book. The amazing part of this bit of history is the general American public’s acceptance—approval might be more accurate—of the arbitrary suspension of rights of certain citizens.

Among Japanese Americans, the great majority accepted the government’s actions as their patriotic duty. A small minority protested what they called the majority’s willingness to be led like sheep to slaughter, and one aspect of their protest is told in Chapter 13.

The events of the time had a profound effect on Colorado’s indigenous Japanese American population. After the war, many of the evacuees, seeing nothing but hostility on the West Coast, chose to remain in Colorado. I was one of the postwar pilgrims. The Japanese American community’s social life and economy changed vastly as their numbers quadrupled, the median age dropped, and English became the primary language.

Kimiko Side finally persuaded me to take on the assignment of chronicling this story, with encouragement from many members of the community and the good folks at the University Press of Colorado. I have completed this book with a combination of pleasure,

pride, and despair. Pleasure and pride because I think it is an interesting story that deserves recording. And despair because I had neither the time nor the energy to dig as deeply as I needed to uncover the story's every detail.

In accepting the assignment to write the book I specified it would be nothing like the self-laudatory "directories" of two generations ago in which Japanese immigrants paid to be listed. Families bought space in these commercially sponsored publications to boast of their successes so they could assure folks back in Japan that they were doing well. "If you want to see your name in print," I told the Japanese Association sponsors, "you may have to look in the telephone directory. There is so much to our story that I must be extremely selective about what I use; the writer must be given full responsibility for the content." The sponsors were understanding and saw no problem.

I must express gratitude to the many individuals who patiently sat for interviews and dug deep for the documentary material and photographs I sought. They are too numerous to mention by name, but it would be ungrateful not to thank Sam Mayeda, Jim Hada, and George Masunaga, who escorted me on an expedition into the Arkansas Valley in search of information. And I must thank old friend Tom Noel, Colorado's leading historian, who encouraged me to take on the project.

No doubt many serious historians will decry the absence of footnotes in this book. Footnotes are, of course, vital in attributing information in a scholarly history, but they have always bothered me as a reader because they break up the flow of the story. Rather than using footnotes in this historical narrative I have made attribution in the text, newspaper-style, where attribution seemed necessary. Tangential information appears in notes at the end of the book.

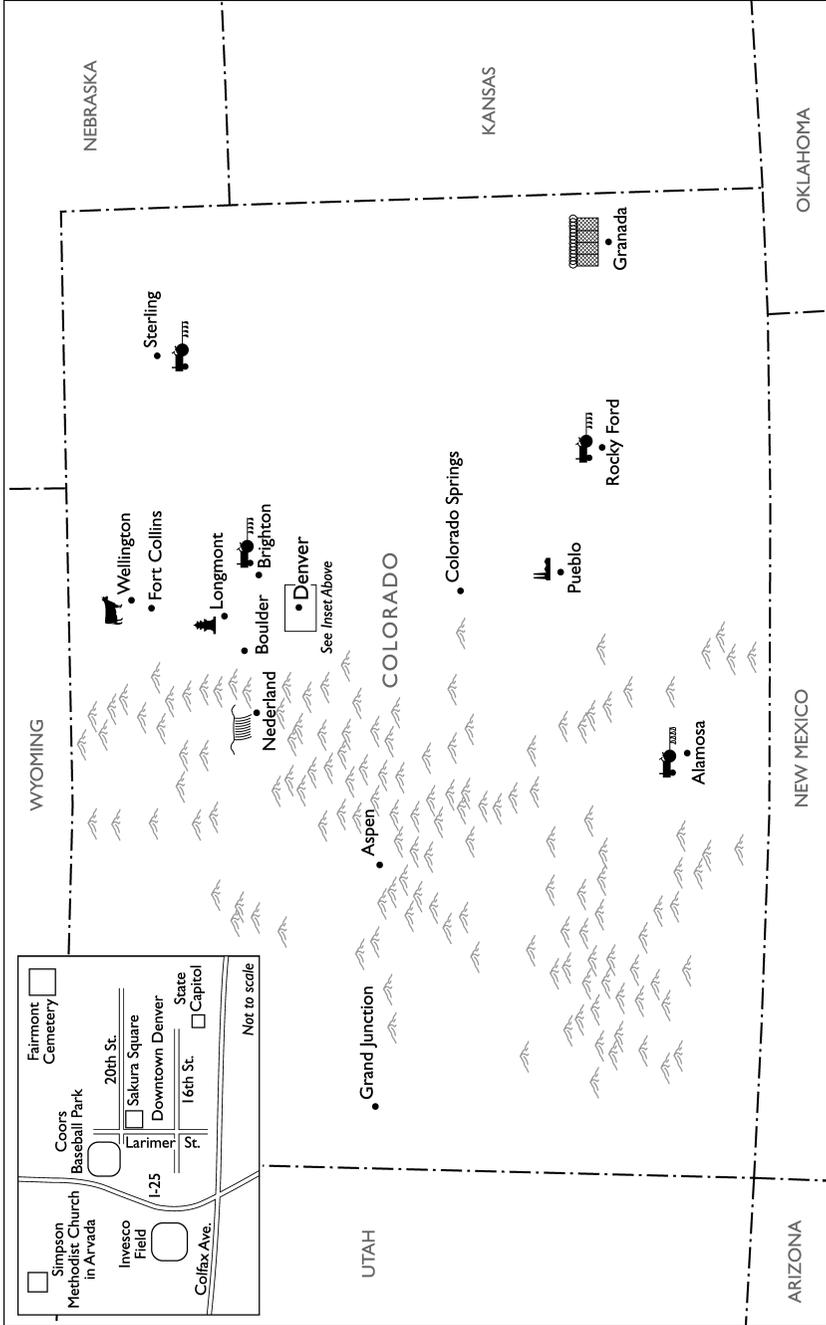
I N T R O D U C T I O N

I have been given full freedom in writing the book and have tried to exercise it judicially. To those I may have offended or overlooked, *sumimasen*, *gomennasai*, *shitsu rei itashimashita*, which are the various ways of apologizing in Japanese. I thank the Japanese Association of Colorado for the opportunity and honor of telling the Colorado story of our people. Members of the association's history project committee are, in alphabetical order, Eiichi Imada, Jim Kanemoto, Mrs. Kimiko Side, Dr. James Terada, and Albert Yamamoto.

Enjoy.

BILL HOSOKAWA
DENVER, 2005

COLORADO'S
JAPANESE AMERICANS



c h a p t e r o n e

THE FIRST CENTURY



“What,” the visitor from Japan asked, “have the Japanese—people from my country and their descendants—what have they done in the century they have been in Colorado to make it a better state, a better place? What have they done for themselves, and for America? What triumphs and difficulties have they had?”

Good questions.

A quick, one-word answer to all of them is “much” despite the fact that the 2000 federal census counted only 11,571 persons of Japanese ancestry living in Colorado, a state of more than 4.3 million. This book attempts to tell the story of the Japanese Americans in Colorado.

In 1886, when Colorado was just emerging from its raw frontier beginnings, a Japanese aristocrat named Matsudaira Tadaatsu appeared on the scene. Matsudaira did not remain long, but he was followed

by hundreds of other Japanese, mostly sons of impoverished peasant families from the provinces. They came to be known as the Issei, meaning “first generation.” Most had little education but were ambitious. Hardworking and accustomed to privation, they had come to the United States with few intending to remain. Most arrived hoping to make a bit of money before returning to the homeland to buy a few acres of farmland, start a family, and live happily ever after. That ended in 1924 when the United States, in a calculated racial insult, passed legislation prohibiting further immigration from Asia.

This 1924 law, called the Asian Exclusion Act, had a second and unforeseen effect. Besides prohibiting further immigration from Japan, it raised a psychological barrier between the Japanese immigrants and their new homeland. Suddenly they felt cut off from their families back home but unwelcome in their newly adopted country. Some, fearing isolation and increasing hostility in the United States, hurried home. But most of the Issei stayed because, for the first time, they realized how deeply they were rooted in the not always hospitable soil of the new world. Many had acquired the confidence and means to marry, lease or purchase land (where it was not prohibited), and establish homes. Perhaps most significant was the appearance of a generation of U.S.-born and -educated sons and daughters who would be cultural and legal aliens in their ancestral homeland. These were the Nisei, the “second generation.” In Colorado, despite drought, depression, and lingering racism, the Issei persevered and watched their children grow.

Seventeen years later the thunder of bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. That earthshaking event led to the forced removal of all Japanese Americans from coastal areas of the West—some 115,000, two-thirds of whom were native-born citizens of the United States—in a panicky defense measure fed by racial prejudice. Some of these exiles

found refuge—voluntarily or not—in Colorado, which was otherwise unaffected by the exclusion order.

During winter 1940–1941 Issei residents of the state watched with growing dread as relations between the United States and Japan worsened. Although they lived a thousand miles and several towering mountain ranges from the Pacific coast, what would happen to them if war broke out? Early in 1941 the leaders of the Japanese Association of Colorado—a loosely knit organization that was part benevolent society, part social association, and part struggling watchdog over Issei rights—called a special meeting in Denver for Issei compatriots in Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska. The purpose was to discuss their mutual plight. On March 8 and 9, 1941, approximately one hundred Japanese from twenty-four districts assembled in Denver at the offices of the Japanese Association at 2109 Arapahoe Street—a building long gone—for what was described as “a meeting of Japanese in the tri-states area to plan for crisis management.”

It was a wide-ranging and often convoluted discussion of perceived problems. No minutes of the meeting have been found. In 1995, however, *Colorado Jijo* magazine published an article about that meeting based largely on the recollections of Rev. Hiram Hisanori Kano who had been there. Father Kano, as he was known, was unusual for an immigrant from Japan. The second son of a nobleman, he was baptized by a Dutch Reformed Church missionary in Japan in 1910. Six years later he traveled to the University of Nebraska to study agricultural economics. Instead of going home with his degree, he moved to western Nebraska where he farmed to support himself while serving as pastor for Japanese in the area. The *Jijo* article said:

He recalled that the 1941 Denver conference brought out discussion on a large number of issues including the education of Nisei, the role of Japanese language schools, how to treat the

Japanese flag in the U.S., the proper way to honor Nisei being called into military service by the new draft law,* and the importance of having enough cash on hand to meet emergency needs in case banks froze the accounts of Japanese depositors.

But the most intense discussion had to do with the possibility of mob violence against Japanese in Denver if tensions in Asia continued to escalate. Some remembered stories of a drunken American mob attacking Denver's Chinatown in the 1880s, setting homes afire and terrifying Chinese. More recently there had been an incident outside Peking in North China where, after a Japanese military plane had mistakenly bombed a Chinese city, mob violence had resulted in the death of several hundred Japanese residents.

There were some at the conference who contended that rather than die an inglorious death at the hands of rioters, it was more honorable to take one's own life by plunging a knife into his throat like samurai. Dr. Konai Miyamoto, a dentist who had attended the Japanese Military Academy, was among those who insisted that the honor of the Japanese residents be upheld by whatever means necessary. Ultimately it was agreed that American authorities should be called on to defend the Japanese residents if violence should arrive. Residents of rural areas in particular were urged to keep in contact with the authorities. As a result of the conference, the Issei began a quiet lobbying effort to make their concerns known. State and local officials were contacted by various individuals and told of the fears of Japanese residents.

*It was customary in Japan for families and friends to fete young men called up for military duty because it was considered a privilege to serve one's country. At the Denver meeting it was agreed that because the Nisei were being summoned for training—and not going into combat—each community could decide locally how it should honor its draftees.

Unrecorded, but certainly prominent in the minds of these Japanese, was concern about the future of their U.S.-born, U.S.-citizen Nisei sons and daughters, most of whom were minors. If, for instance, members of the Issei were arrested or even deported, what would happen to their children? The Issei generation, particularly in the rural areas, had sacrificed to set up Japanese language schools where their children could learn about the old country. The first words these children had spoken were likely Japanese words and they had learned Japanese nursery rhymes and heard Japanese folktales from their mothers who spoke little English. When they were old enough to attend the public schools, these children became English-speakers and their fluency in Japanese lagged. What if Japanese immigrants and their families were deported? How would their children survive in Japan where they would be as much strangers as their parents were in the United States?

In parts of the West Coast with large populations of ethnic Japanese, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, U.S. security agents had started quiet surveillance of Japanese American communities well before the war. There is no record of such activity in Colorado, but it is likely authorities were aware of the Denver conference. One can only conjecture that the emphasis on local affairs and their own safety by the Japanese at the conference—who were open enough to stand for a solemn-faced group photograph outside the meeting hall—reassured authorities that they did not pose a security risk. After war broke out, the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the West Coast rounded up hundreds of Issei as a precaution, but only two are known to have been detained in the tri-states area. Ironically, Kano was one of them. (The other was Shiro Toda, publisher of the *Rocky Shimpo* newspaper.) Kano's ties with Japan's aristocracy—and many prominent Japanese who visited him during trips to the United States—may have concerned the FBI.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, launched a wave of fear and apprehension among Colorado's Japanese, and anger and confusion elsewhere. As a consequence, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, authorizing the military to remove "any or all persons"—including citizens—from areas designated as "sensitive."

The extraordinary fear that led to Executive Order 9066 is reflected in testimony from late February 1942 before a congressional investigative body, the Tolan Committee, by then chief legal officer of California, Attorney General Earl Warren. He said:

To assume that the enemy has not planned fifth column activities for us in a wave of sabotage is simply to live in a fool's paradise. . . . I am afraid many of our people in other parts of the country are of the opinion that because we have had no sabotage and no fifth column activities in the state since the beginning of the war, that means that none have been planned for us. But I take the view that this is the most ominous sign in our whole situation. It convinces me more than perhaps any other factor that the sabotage that we are to get, the fifth column activities that we are to get, are timed just like Pearl Harbor was timed and just like the invasion of France, and of Denmark, and of Norway, and all those other countries. I believe we are just being lulled into a false sense of security and that the only reason we haven't had disaster in California is because it has been timed for a different date, and that when that time comes if we don't do something about it, it is going to mean disaster both to California and to our nation. Our day of reckoning is bound to come in that regard.*

*Warren, who later became the chief justice of the Supreme Court, wrote in his autobiography after retirement that the position he took demanding the ouster or imprisonment of Japanese Americans was one of his most painful mistakes. He and many others believed that because nothing bad had happened after the Pearl Harbor attack, something bad was sure to happen.

The “any or all persons” referred to in Roosevelt’s executive order turned out to be all persons of Japanese ancestry, alien and non-alien, and “sensitive areas” eventually encompassed the southern half of Arizona, all of California, the western halves of Oregon and Washington, and all of Alaska. “Non-alien” was obviously a cruel euphemism for citizens who suddenly discovered their constitutional rights had been wiped out by Roosevelt’s pen.

For a brief period, all persons of Japanese ancestry in the prohibited areas could move out “voluntarily.” This was not easy to do. Where would the evacuees go if they fled from their homes in coastal areas? What would they do with their belongings? How would they support themselves? Some, fortunately, had friends or kin living in interior states, such as Colorado, who they could impose upon. There are no specific figures, but several hundred refugees from the West Coast hurried to Colorado, which in 1940 had an estimated population of no more than 2,000 ethnic Japanese. Most of these evacuees found shelter and jobs with friends or relatives.

Meanwhile, the federal authorities herded all remaining ethnic Japanese in the prohibited zones—some 115,000 of them—into fourteen temporary camps, ringed by barbed wire and hurriedly constructed at fairgrounds and racetracks where there was open space, power, water, and access to sewer lines. These were no more than holding pens for the prisoners until more permanent camps could be built in the interior of the country. Ten of these “relocation centers” were constructed, most of them on desolate federal land. One was in Colorado. It was called Amache and located just outside the town of Granada in the state’s sparsely populated southeastern corner. Another was Heart Mountain, between the towns of Cody and Powell in Wyoming’s northwestern corner. This camp was to play a significant part in the history of Japanese Americans in Colorado.

In 1943 the War Relocation Authority began a relocation program encouraging the evacuees to leave the camps for jobs in the nation's interior in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, and St. Louis. An estimated 4,000 made their way to Colorado, most of them settling in Denver where the Japanese American population tripled within a few months. They were to leave a deep mark on Colorado.