

Negroes and Japanese Evacuees

By Thelma Thurston Gorham

DON'T curse the dark, light a candle," is an age-old Oriental adage which Japanese-Americans apply to the problems of their every day living.

Recently when the members of a professionally prominent East Bay Japanese family were released from the Topaz, Utah, relocation center, they were asked in apparent concern and irreproachable sincerity: "Did you know that the Negroes in the Bay Area resent your return to your homes on the Coast?"

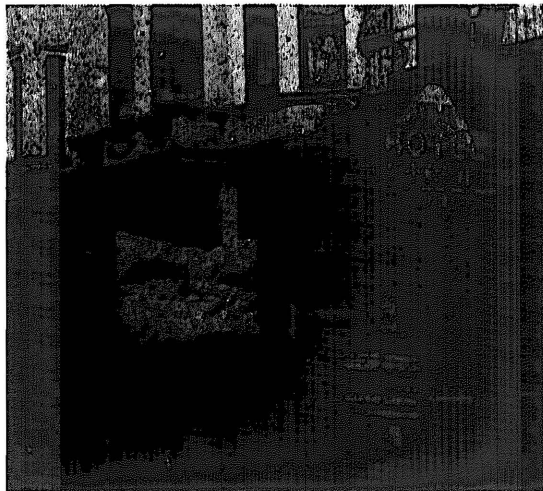
Members of the Nisei family replied that they did not. They thought it odd and expressed surprise among themselves that the return of Japanese-Americans should arouse resentment among Negro Americans. The "warning" question aroused no matching resentment in them, but it strengthened their determination to tread carefully and offend no one.

In San Francisco's Fillmore district, where the Negro population has quadrupled itself since World War II began, it has been hinted repeatedly since the Issei, Nisei and Sansei—first, second and third generation Japanese—began returning that there "might be trouble." The returnees from relocation centers serving the Northern California area—Topaz, Utah and Hart Mountain, Wyoming—might create tensions and produce racial difficulties in the area.

In the East Bay area, Oakland and Berkeley, predictions ran rife about hardships that the in-migrant Negro population would suffer when returning Japanese Americans reclaimed their homes and other properties. Of San Francisco's Fillmore district, San Mateo and other communities in the West Bay and Peninsula region, similar predictions were made.

Nevertheless, as the War Relocation Authority makes plans to close most of its centers in this area by mid-November or not later than Christmas, a number of heartening signs have been noted in the Northern California area. Not the least of these is the indication that there won't be any difficulty between returning Japanese-Americans and Negro Americans if that difficulty must be of their own making—if seeds of friction are left to be sown by members of those groups. An exhaustive survey of neighborhoods formerly occupied by Americans of Japanese ancestry reveals that the Nisei are anxious above everything else to avoid any friction. Most Negroes are frankly surprised, and somewhat puzzled, at the idea that they are

What are the possibilities for racial tension between Negroes and the returning Japanese evacuees on the West Coast? How much Japanese-American property is now occupied by Negroes? What have been the relations of Negroes and Japanese-Americans? The reader will find answers to these questions in this discerning article



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A Nisei family is moving back into the ground floor apartment of this building. This building, one of several in which Negroes and Nisei are now living side by side, is located on Buchanan street between Post and Geary.

supposed to be resentful about the return of the Japanese.

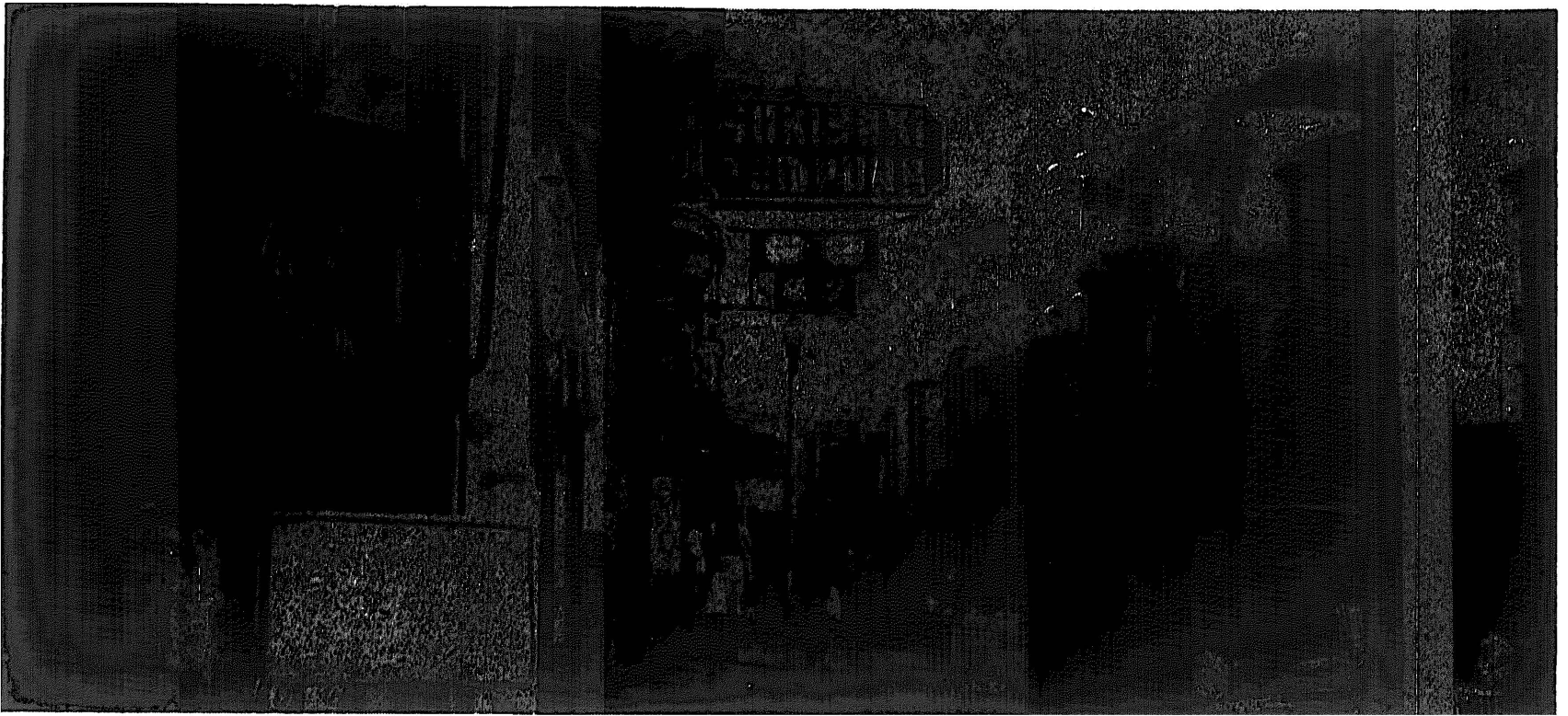
Number of Nisei Returned

To date of the 1,300 individual Japanese-Americans who have returned to the San Francisco area, about 600 are in family groups. By Christmas several thousand Japanese will have returned to Northern California. The alarmists have been predicting wholesale evictions of Negro families from former Japanese-occupied properties. So far evictions have been very slow. Moreover, contrary to popular rumors, Issei and Nisei do not own a large amount of the property credited to them. In most of the Northern

California areas where they established themselves, most of the Japanese were renting their properties, both commercial and residential. Some of the Issei, first generation Japanese, had paid rents from twenty-five to thirty years. The reason for this is two-fold. First, many of the Issei, in fact the majority of them, came to America with the idea of gaining wealth with which to return to the homeland and live out their declining years in luxury. Secondly, California law prohibits ownership of property by first-generation Japanese. Most first-generation Japanese who put off returning to Japan and became rooted here did so because their children were Americans and preferred to remain that way.

An estimate of the number of pieces of property owned by Nisei in San Francisco, including business and residential tracts, is hard to arrive at. This is due to the fact that a number of pieces of former Japanese-American-owned property have been sold since the Japanese were evacuated in 1941, and a number of pieces of property have been listed in the names of title and holding companies. Estimates vary from 83 up to 122 pieces of commercial and residential property owned in the Fillmore district. Of this figure approximately 78 pieces may be classified as business property. This does not leave a great many pieces of residential property.

Prior to the present wartime growth of San Francisco's Afro-American population, Negro residency followed no rigidly segregated pattern. The small number of Negro residents were "swallowed up" in the city's polyglot population. The majority of the Negro population lived in the blocks between Fillmore and Presidio, California and Turk, an area bordering on the Japanese settlement. Smaller numbers were located in other sections of the city; but even the area of Negro concentration, the Fillmore district, did not constitute a "Black Belt," inasmuch as sizeable groups of white, Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese resided in the same area. When the Japanese were relocated in 1941, the newly available space for housing and living was taken over for and by the expanding Negro population. The Negro area of residence was extended about six blocks in the direction of San Francisco's downtown business district. With the influx of thousands of new Negro residents into the area, a larger section of the city became a definite residential district with a decidedly dark complexion.



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Many signs denoting Nisei occupancy or Japanese business have been replaced by signs of numerous small Negro businesses that flourish in the Fillmore district. However, many Japanese signs, too heavy to move or take down easily, have been left up and signs of the new occupants have been placed above, below and around the old displays, which once symbolized this section on Post street between Webster and Buchanan known as San Francisco's "Little Tokyo."

However, in view of the numerical unimportance of Japanese-owned residential property all of the predictions about impending tensions appear ludicrous. At the same time, one can't help realizing that the situation has another aspect which counter-balances ridiculousness with gravity. It is apparent that, small though they may be in number, the Japanese-owned properties can be used as a splitting wedge by the "divide and rule crowd" to put the two minorities against each other. Moreover, in the congested area into which the in-migrant Negro war workers in San Francisco have been forced by restrictive covenants and a deplorable lack of decent available housing, everything is used for residences. To meet the shortage, business buildings, store fronts, shops, all go when an enterprising realtor can obtain them, sub-let them to an even more enterprising individual who has them partitioned into cubbyhole "living quarters" which are rented at extortionate prices to desperate war-workers and their families. When one realizes that a two-story, four-flat building can, and does, house up to twenty-five families, then one begins to see the extent to which the anti-Japanese racial propaganda can make that splitting wedge an incendiary and vicious weapon at the disposal of American-style fascists and others who might profit by keeping the two groups at swords' points.

Amount of Property Owned

Although Japanese Americans controlled fully one-fourth of San Francisco's flourishing cleaning and dyeing industry before the war and played a fairly important role in many of the city's other commercial enter-

prises, this is what the Japanese own today in the way of business establishments: three amusement places, six apartment buildings or rooming houses, three apparel shops, two art shops, two beauty and barber shops, eight churches, five craftsmen shops, one drug store, two express, taxi or auto hire establishments, one food products manufacturing concern, three retail food stores, six general agencies, three hotels, one import-export firm, five laundries and dry-cleaning establishments, three newspaper printing shops, five organizational or club buildings, five professional office buildings, four restaurants, two service stations with garages and two miscellaneous commercial establishments.

It is because there are potentially fascist interests at work on the scene that one looks hard for signs which point in other directions—signs which do not indicate racial tensions and community tensions. One finds them in the sympathetic attitude of Negro tenants toward their returning Japanese landlords and neighbors, in the "hostels" which Negro groups in San Francisco and Oakland have helped to establish for returning Nisei, in the considerate and patient notices which Japanese give tenants who must vacate their premises.

So-called racial attitudes are conditioned by things which affect individuals, directly or indirectly. Among the in-migrant Negroes of Northern California attitudes vary according to the degree in which the return of the Nisei affect war-workers living in the congested areas that were formerly the neat, quiet and altogether unglamorous Japanese settlement.

When the Japanese were evacuated from

the Coast, there were Negroes who thought it "a dirty shame." There were those who felt that if that sort of thing could be done to one minority it might be done to another. Rarely did Negroes feel that the Japanese should have been kept in the relocation centers.

Racial Attitudes

While flagrant Negro resentfulness toward the returning evacuees is not easily discernible, there are conversely, numerous reports of Japanese who are very unhappy about the treatment that their properties received at the hands of Negro tenants. There have been reports of resentfulness on the part of Japanese toward Negroes who rented homes in which Issei and Nisei property was stored and who abused, pilfered or destroyed that property. Whites committed the same sort of offenses—and worse ones, motivated by greed. One Japanese with whom I talked told of a white family which broke into the locked-up section of the Nisei home, pilfered many possessions, sold a typewriter, vacuum sweeper and an adding machine, in addition to "borrowing" the Nisei landlord's automobile for a trip to Los Angeles. Another Japanese told of a Negro family whose care of his property would have warranted no censure—if the tenants hadn't pawned a valuable painting and forgot to get it out of hock before the Nisei returned.

The tendency on the part of Negro Americans toward resentment of the Japanese is something that occurs only in rare instances, such as those in which tenants hard-pressed for housing are pressured by landlords, sim-

ilarly hard-pressed. The so-called smouldering resentment is not a prevalent condition; it appears to be more a figment of someone's unhealthy imagination. It is significant that wherever any resentment has been discovered there is also found housing difficulty, growing out of discrimination in housing toward Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Negroes and Filipinos.

It is significant that at a Town Hall meeting held in the Booker T. Washington Community Center in San Francisco, there was no argument given by the negative side when the Center's Carver Club debated the question, "Should Japanese Be Returned To The West Coast." A Negro minister whose congregation is predominantly colored, was the first San Francisco cleric to welcome the returned Japanese and invite them to membership in his church. Negro neighbors of a Nisei dentist and his wife in Oakland were among the first to welcome them back to their home. A Nisei couple reported that on a train enroute home from a relocation center the friendliest person they encountered was a Negro train porter. In San Mateo, Issei and Nisei reported to the WRA that Negro occupants had kept their home immaculate and had taken remarkable care of their possessions. Former Negro clients welcomed a Nisei dentist back to his office in San Francisco. One Japanese girl came back to San Francisco to live temporarily with Negroes who had been her family's neighbors. Others followed suit. Now many Negro families throughout the Peninsula area have taken Japanese into their homes.

Practically all of the efforts at arousing or creating tensions have had as their crux the critical Northern California housing situation. On the employment front, few attempts have been made, and fewer inroads gained, in pitting Negro Americans against Orientals. Obviously the national policy of relocating as many as possible in eastern cities has lessened the possibilities for tension in this connection. On the other hand, the types of employment into which the returned Japanese are being taken seldom conflict with those in which the Negro is seeking integration or infiltration. So far the majority of individual returnees have been single girls who go into secretarial or clerical work with the OWI, WRA and a few other governmental agencies. To get housing, many do part-time domestic work in exchange for rooms. Nisei males who come back are usually drafted at once. Almost simultaneously with their return their Selective Service numbers "come up" and they are put into uniform. Returning Nisei 4-F's have experienced job placement difficulties which make some of the rebuffs experienced by Negroes on the Coast seem mild by comparison.

The Employment Picture

The employment picture does have its brighter side, however. At the Stanford

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From top to bottom: Hub of the Fillmore district is this busy intersection at Geary and Fillmore streets. Here one sees a colorful mixture of black, brown, and yellow faces. Occasionally one sees a white face, too. This building formerly housed the largest Japanese-language school on the West Coast but is now occupied by the Booker T. Washington Community Center. Once a Japanese YMCA, this building (bottom) became the Buchanan Street USO for Negro GIs.

Japanese Evacuees

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University Hospital in San Francisco, three Nisei pharmacists were hired recently when the resignation of the white pharmaceutical staff left the hospital high and dry. Nisei laboratory technicians have also been hired at the hospital; and in Oakland, a Negro optician has set a precedent by employing a Nisei optometrist in his office.

Because Negroes would be quick to resent any special considerations shown to Japanese-Americans, the War Relocation Authority has worked closely with employing agencies to see that no Negroes are fired just to create jobs for returning Nisei. The Japanese, themselves, have also cooperated in this regard because they are eager to do nothing which will create racial animosity. Down the Peninsula, where Caucasian depredations against the returnees have been most violent, Negro leaders have even recruited jobs for the Japanese. In several cases, where wealthy Peninsula estate owners contemplated replacing Negro and Italian help with Japanese, the WRA has advised against such action, only to have Negro absentee or job gardeners give up some of their jobs in order to help provide homes for returned Issei or Nisei families.

In Northern California, particularly in San Francisco, the Negro has always felt friendlier toward the Japanese because, even before the war, Japanese Americans were more kindly disposed toward Negro Americans. Although like the Chinese they employed practically no Negroes in their businesses, unlike the Chinese they did not follow the established policy of the dominant group in dealing with Afro-Americans. With the

coming of World War II, the Negro on the Coast felt more sympathy than animosity toward the Japanese-American. Today he is apt to remember former kindnesses and courtesies and ponder the question of why he should resent the return of the Japanese. Some even ask the sixty-four dollar question: "If the government was able to build those relocation centers so quickly, why can't it build more houses here in the city?"

More and more Negroes are becoming aware of the restrictive covenants maintained by powerful real estate factions and directed against many racial minorities, even the kowtowing Chinese. (Picturesque and congested "China Town" is reported to have the highest tuberculosis rate in the city of San Francisco.) The tensions, which alarmists have been talking up, appear to center only around the critical shortage of decent, or any kind of, housing for minorities. Vicious housing restrictions laid the groundwork for Detroit's bloody answer to a fascist's prayer. In San Francisco, sired by indifferent and greedy landlords who neglect repairs and let properties deteriorate in the minority-packed ghettos, a similar sort of condition—the sort on which racists and alarmists thrive—is aborning. Only, here, the thing that happened in Detroit isn't likely to be repeated—not if the harvest of tension must be reaped by the Nisei or Negroes, themselves. Neither minority wants any part of such an ill harvest. The Negroes are sympathetic and wary, but not resentful toward the Issei, Nisei and Sansei. The Japanese American tread carefully and diplomatically; and they live by an age-old adage, "Don't curse the dark, light a candle!"