

Outlawing Japanese-Americans?

CHRISTIAN
CENTURY

*On California falls the re-
sponsibility for reassuring a
suspicious post-war Asia*

By Theodore Fithian

“IF you want to help—you Americans of Caucasian descent—you can help us to re-establish ourselves in the community after the war.”

We were talking to Harold Kimura just before he left for Manzanar. At the time, we thought he was looking too far into the future. We realize differently now. The problem of Japanese resettlement in California is not going to be an easy one. Yet it must be solved if the peace aims we proclaim to the rest of the world are not to be a mockery at home.

Harold is an American citizen. So are two-thirds of the 75,000 “Japanese” who lived in the Los Angeles area. When the agitation started to

deport all “Japanese” residents, Harold, and five other American-Japanese, were forced to resign their positions at the Department of Water and Power. One of them, the father of six children, had served twenty years in the U. S. Navy.

Harold tried to make a fight of it. He considered his citizenship his most precious possession. He didn't want to surrender any of its rights just as he didn't want to shirk its responsibilities. He refused to resign until he had consulted three substantial American friends, then he regretfully bowed to the inevitable.

Americans of Japanese descent were hopelessly bewildered when their evacuation was finally ordered. Here were families with sons in the U. S.

Army and the parents destined for concentration camps. Some of them took their own lives, not caring to live as "dangerous aliens."

Bewilderment gradually gave way to a stoic acceptance of their lot. Few were bitter. Spokesmen generally agreed that evacuation was the only practicable solution. Harold differed, believing the F.B.I. could easily have ferreted out those who were traitorous. But he wholeheartedly cooperated with the authorities to speed the evacuation and to make it as painless as possible. As the foremost layman of the Japanese Intra-Denominational Church of Hollywood, Harold was a community leader. He consulted with the army, held meetings in the church, and helped families to iron out their most vexing problems. Heavy financial losses could not be avoided, however. Real estate, automobiles, furniture, inventories and leases had to be disposed of in a hurry. An eight room house was leased for ten dollars a month. A new frigidaire was sold for five dollars. Things like that.

More than \$10,000,000 was invested in the Los Angeles area by citizens of Japanese ancestry. Yet their material losses were seldom mentioned. The psychic wrench of their social banishment seemed to dwarf other considerations. Now, at Manzanar and Santa Anita, most of the evacuees are accepting their internment in good heart. "It's the only way we can help win the war," one of them said. "It's our job. We want to do it cheerfully."

Many want to do more. Harold, for instance, wants to get an engineering job somewhere in the east or middle west. He has willing hands and a clear head. Born in Fresno, he's the product of twenty-eight years of democratic give-and-take. His father came to this country in 1900 and never wished to re-visit the land of his birth. Harold's mother, miraculously surviving a serious illness, led the family into the Christian fold. Harold was baptized when he was eight and has since been a faithful parishioner. He graduated at the University of California and continued his engineering studies at Cal-Tech. When war threatened, he tried to get a job in an airplane factory but his application was rejected. That was a disappointment. He felt that his training and skill would be of real value to his country.

Harold's haunting fear, and that of the other evacuees, is that they will continue to be treated as aliens after the war. In that case, if their full rights of citizenship are denied, then Hitler's racial thesis will have won a triumph in America. A dispossessed racial minority is a new thing in the United States. We vigorously champion the rights of such minorities abroad. Yet various or-

ganizations in California are now officially demanding that the "Japanese" be permanently barred from the state. Their voice is powerful. It's an old refrain with some of them, such as the agricultural interests, but now their voice is echoed by the antipathies of war.

Hysteria

Wartime hysteria brewed some fantastic stories after the shock of Pearl Harbor. A bridge party was not a success without its titbit of terror. "My dear, we've simply got to do something! We're not safe! My gardner told me this morning that he'd soon be giving orders to me. Imagine! He said the Japanese would soon control California." . . . "Why, didn't you know? They all have their military orders. They're just waiting for the signal to strike. Our gardner admitted that his job was to kill my husband. My maid was to kill me!" Such yarns, related in the second person, were common currency in Southern California. If no Japs were in the particular community, a few were always conveniently lurking over the hill.

The agricultural interests hope to prevent the return of their erstwhile competitors, alleging unfair competition and sharp practices. How can they compete when the Japanese work their whole families in the field while they have to hire labor? How can they make a living in the produce business, as farmers or dealers, if the clannish Japanese control most of the business from farm to table? How can they compete with a rice-eating standard of living?

Californians shouldn't underrate themselves. They actually compete with the coolie labor of Asia, and do very well at it, thank you. California raises a great deal of rice on a scientific basis. The crop is sown mechanically in dry fields which are then flooded, or sown by airplane for a "wet plant." This crop, wholly in the hands of white farmers, was largely exported to Japan before last December.

The best answer to the charge that the Japanese control the produce business is that other farmers and dealers make a living in the trade despite the fact, that Japanese pioneered its development. Monopolies do exist, in certain districts and certain crops, but that is always the tendency of competitive business.

The Japanese don't work long hours in the field because they like back-breaking labor. They came to this country, like other immigrants, in search of a more abundant life, and they first came by invitation. The pioneering railroad builders and large landowners wanted cheap labor. The Japanese helped to supply the answer. Then, when

jobs became scarce, they were forced out of trades where native whites could earn a livelihood. They took to the soil. They nursed vegetable patches. They supplied a demand. They prospered, leasing land they were forbidden to own or buying it in the name of their American born children. They sent their children to college. These children, or nisei, tried to follow trades or professions of their particular liking. Racial prejudice barred them. They returned to the produce business, many of them to sweat in the field. It was tough going. They didn't compete with the white farmers. They competed with Mexicans, whole families of Mexicans, hired by the white farmers at a subsistence wage. They competed with Armenians, Chinese, East Indians, Filipinos, Okies—all the cheap labor which industrialized agriculture in California has systematically imported for decades. They competed with itinerant laborers who had only their muscles to sell.

Return of Competition Feared

If the Japanese had remained in this class the large employers would undoubtedly welcome them back. Racial prejudice is seldom acute until it is fanned by economic competition. For that reason, the Japanese will get it from both barrels. Labor groups, fearing a depression after the war, are joining the agitation to keep them out of the state.

And then there is the new vested interest—the legion of small merchants, farmers and tradespeople who have taken over what the Japanese left behind. Can they be dispossessed to make way for those who were dispossessed before them? Hardly. Will they be powerless to prevent a sudden influx of able competitors? Not if political charlatans can help it.

Case of the Katos

Let's take an example. Harry Kato operated the vegetable stand in our neighborhood. Harry was born in Japan. His wife, Ethel, born in San Jose, is a typical product of our high schools. Their small daughter, Eko, joined her parents after school hours to decorate the place with her elfin appearance. They were a delightful family, friendly and courteous. Their fruits and vegetables were always of good quality, spotlessly clean and temptingly displayed. They did a good business.

The Katos drove to Oklahoma to anticipate the evacuation order, arriving at their destination, fortunately, before the expected addition to their family arrived. Their departure had been a sorrowful occasion for their many anxious friends.

The vegetable stand was finally taken over by

a young couple from Utah, a farmerish looking fellow and his pretty wife. They're nice, and they deserve the success they are beginning to enjoy. But the place is less attractive than it used to be, the quality of the produce has suffered and the service is rather perfunctory. So if the Katos returned and opened another stand in the neighborhood, they would regain most of their former trade. They put more zing into the business.

The return of this kind of competition will undoubtedly become a fiery political issue.

So perhaps it would be best if the Katos stayed in Oklahoma. They're doing all right there, we hear. Other Japanese may settle in the south and middle west, and these regions would be the richer for their coming. But that doesn't solve the problem. Most American-Japanese will want to return to their home towns, where they were born, made friends, and gained a foothold in the community.

The general deterioration of vegetable markets has prompted ordinary citizens to ask a simple question. Have the Japanese been an asset to California? Here is the record. They have taken some of the most unpromising land and made it fruitful. They have helped to make fresh foods plentiful and cheap. Their artistry created California's most pleasant roadside scene—those inviting markets where fruits and vegetables, scrubbed clean and polished, are colorfully displayed in arresting designs. The Japanese have been well-mannered, industrious, law-abiding citizens.

The Pacific war, while it has aroused antipathies, has also developed in thoughtful Californians a sense of international responsibility. They now realize fearfully that they live on a frontier. Across the Pacific lies Asia and the Pacific doesn't seem so wide anymore. The largest continent on earth, with more than half the earth's population, is geographically our neighbor, and the mistreatment of her racial groups within our borders doesn't contribute to neighborly relations. A few Californians even have a sense of guilt. They believe one of the roots of our recent conflict grew from our own soil. The anti-Oriental agitation in our state was primarily responsible for the Supreme Court decisions which denied to Orientals the rights of citizenship, and for the Immigration Law of 1924 which excluded their immigration on that basis. This offended the proud Japanese. The Chinese, Koreans and Indians, equally proud, also are displeased by the stigma of racial inferiority to the Caucasian and Negroid peoples who alone are deemed worthy of citizenship. These Asiatics, on the threshold of independence, may not be the right people to offend in the future.