

7 – The House on Lemon Street

By Maria Fleming

1916: a Japanese-American family fights for the right to own property in Riverside, California.

Like immigrants from Europe, those from Asia came to America seeking economic opportunities. But they soon found that there were limits placed on what they could achieve in the United States. Asian immigrants were denied U.S. citizenship and all the privileges that status entailed, including the right to own property. In 1916, one family battled against the unjust laws aimed at immigrants of Japanese ancestry. In doing so, they lent their own voices to the growing chorus of Asian Americans insisting: "We belong here."

The children of Jukichi Harada, a Japanese émigré living in Riverside, Calif., in the early 1900s, used to tease their father about being more patriotic than any American citizen. He named his restaurant after one of his heroes - George Washington. Portraits of other U.S. presidents lined the walls of the eatery, where Harada served "all-American" food. On the Fourth of July and other national holidays, he proudly displayed an American flag outside his home. Harold Harada, the youngest of Jukichi's six children, describes his father as someone who "oozed red, white and blue."

But the love Jukichi Harada felt for America was not returned by his adopted country. He lived in the United States during a time of deep prejudice against Asian Americans. In the Western states, where most Asian immigrants lived, White citizens formed exclusion leagues whose sole purpose was to keep Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans and other Asians out of the U.S.

The offer of American citizenship, extended to tens of thousands of European immigrants, was denied those of Asian descent. Asian Americans couldn't vote, testify in court or practice certain professions. And in almost a dozen Western states, immigrants from Asia didn't even have the right to buy a house or own a farm.

Prejudice against Asians in America hadn't always run so deep. When the first Chinese immigrants arrived in the mid-1800s, railroad companies welcomed them as a cheap and reliable source of labor. But after the railroads were completed, Whites found the Chinese competing for factory jobs they wanted for themselves. They pushed for laws banning Chinese immigration; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 became the first U.S. law to bar a particular ethnic group.

Japanese immigrants were the next to arrive from Asia. For the most part, they devoted their energies to agriculture. Japanese laborers drained the swamplands and irrigated the deserts that would become some of the West Coast's most productive fields and orchards. When Japanese immigrants started to become successful farmers themselves, Whites again panicked that the prosperity of "outsiders" would diminish their own prospects and profits. In California, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and other states, legislators enacted laws that said "aliens ineligible to citizenship" could not own land. The laws did not specify Japanese immigrants, but that is whom they targeted. The alien land laws, as they were called, guaranteed that immigrants of Japanese descent would remain field hands and tenant farmers.



The perceived economic threat that Asian Americans presented to U.S. citizens, most of them recent immigrants from Europe themselves, only partially accounted for discrimination against them. The other factor inspiring this resentment was a deep-seated ethnic prejudice. Asian immigrants looked very different from European immigrants. They wore different clothes, ate different foods, and practiced different religions. And perhaps most significantly, their skin was a different color. As a document from one Asian exclusion league pronounced, "The preservation of the Caucasian race upon American soil and particularly upon the Western soil thereof, necessitates the adoption of all possible measures to prevent or minimize the immigration of Asiatics to America."

But despite a different skin color and cultural background, Jukichi Harada had emigrated to America for the same reasons most Europeans did:

He thought he would find better job opportunities in the United States; he also believed his children would experience more freedom growing up in America than they would in what was, at the time, a restrictive, tradition-bound Japanese society.

Although trained as a teacher in Japan, Jukichi worked for several years as a mess cook for a U.S. navy ship, traveling between Japan and the United States. In 1903, at the age of 23, he sailed away from Japan for good and settled in Los Angeles, Calif. Two years later, he was joined by his wife, Ken, and young son, Masa Atsu, whom he had left behind in Japan. While in Los Angeles, both Jukichi and Ken worked in a cafe, cooking and waiting tables.

In the fall of 1905, they moved south to the booming citrus town of Riverside, Calif., where they found jobs in another restaurant. Despite a climate of hostility toward Asian Americans, the Haradas worked hard and prospered. In a few years, they had saved enough to rent and run their own rooming house and open a restaurant.

The rooming house and eatery served mostly the farm hands who picked and packed oranges and lemons from the citrus groves surrounding the city and laborers who worked in the nearby citrus crate factory. The Haradas lived with their boarders on the crowded second floor of the rooming house.

The two businesses required the entire family's efforts. Their days began at 5 a.m., when the restaurant opened to serve breakfast to pickers heading to the citrus groves. Jukichi Harada waited tables and worked the cash register while Ken cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner. The children took care of various tasks, depending on their age. The older siblings washed dishes and mopped floors around their school schedules, while the little ones stood watch at the front door and called out "Okasan!" - "Customer!" - if someone came in while Ken and Jukichi were both working in the kitchen.

At night, after the 15-hour workday, Jukichi would practice sumi-e, a form of Japanese calligraphy. He was so skilled with the brushwork that stonecutters in Riverside would hire him to inscribe tombstones for the Japanese cemetery.

Although the Haradas worked long hours and led a modest life, they were content. Jukichi and Ken Harada felt optimistic that they would continue to improve the quality of life for their children. Of course, the Haradas encountered prejudice, as other Japanese in America did. They learned to avoid the segregated public facilities and ignore occasional verbal insults.

But Jukichi Harada did not feel these slights kept him from fulfilling his ambitions. His only deep regret was that he was unable to become an American citizen, despite his persistent efforts. Jukichi wrote repeatedly to the naval commander in Washington, D.C., asking that he be granted citizenship status in light of his maritime service. Each rebuff was another stinging disappointment.

"I have lived in America now a long time, Harada lamented. "My heart is American. All my sympathies are American. I think American, but the law will not let me become an American."

Jukichi did not let the disappointment of this rejection fester into bitterness. Instead, his children remember, he strove harder to be a model citizen. He was active in the community and generous with his small income. He wanted his children to assimilate into American culture and encouraged them to attain the highest level of education.



Jukichi decided to put the deed to the house in the name of 3-year-old Yoshizo, 5-year-old Sumi, and 9-year-old Mine because they were U.S. citizens by birth. Masa Atsu (at left) was born in Japan.

Then in 1913, tragedy struck. Ken and Jukichi's five-year-old son, Tadao, contracted diphtheria. He died one autumn day in his father's arms. Jukichi blamed the death on the family's living conditions. The boarding house, filled with laborers from the fields and factories, was crowded and dusty.

There was nowhere for the children to play outside, which Harada believed deprived them of healthy fresh air. He made immediate plans to improve his family's living situation.

He found what he believed would be the means for safeguarding his family's health and well-being - a simple wooden frame house in the heart of Riverside's downtown residential district. White with gray trim, the house had six rooms, enough to accommodate the growing

Harada family. It was also near a good school and the church the family attended. And best of all, the house boasted a small yard out back where his children could play in the fresh air. He made plans to purchase the property.

Jukichi Harada was aware of the Alien Land Law of 1913 - passed just six months before his son's death - that prohibited non-citizens from owning property in California. The logical solution to this problem, he believed, was to put the deed to the house in the name of three of his children: 9-year-old Mine, 5-year-old Sumi, and 3-year-old Yoshizo. Because the children had been born in the U.S., they were citizens by law. Jukichi would act as trustee of the property till the children were old enough to assume ownership.

On his way back from the real estate agent's office, where he had just signed the papers for purchase, Harada bumped into his soon-to-be-next-door neighbor, Cynthia Robinson. Alarmed that a Japanese family would be moving to the all-White block, Robinson quickly spread word through the neighborhood. Within days, several families had organized a committee with the aim of keeping the Haradas from buying the house on Lemon Street.

The committee approached Harada and asked him to give up the property. They offered him \$2,000 for the house, which was \$500 more than he had paid for it. When he declined the offer, the committee hired a lawyer, who again tried to persuade the Haradas to sell.



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Jukichi Harada refused the offer even more vehemently, vowing to hold onto, at any cost, the house that would put his children in a better living environment.

"I won't sell," Harada repeated. "You can murder me, you can throw me into the sea, and I won't sell."

The neighborhood confrontation soon attracted the attention of the larger community and, eventually, the state. Politicians and citizens alike were concerned that the Haradas were one of many families finding loopholes in the Alien Land Law. Sixty families signed a petition demanding that the Haradas be evicted from the house on Lemon Street.

J. C. Hansler, one of the petition's signers and the owner of a downtown furniture shop not far from the Harada house, told a newspaper reporter, "I don't want to have any trouble with

Harada and don't want to hurt his feelings, but we feel that if he lives there other Japanese will move in and it will inevitably hurt all the property in the neighborhood."

Other neighbors were even more hostile toward the Haradas. One boy threw rocks at the children. A woman who owned a house on the corner of Lemon Street would shout at the children as they passed, "You Japs stay on your side of the street! Don't you ever walk over here!" Fearing for their children's safety, Ken and Jukichi forbade them from straying beyond their fenced yard.

There were other Whites in the community, however, who offered their support to the Haradas. One, Frank Miller, was a prominent businessman. His interest in Japanese art and culture led him to become acquainted with Riverside's Asian American community. When the state eventually filed a lawsuit against Jukichi Harada in October of 1916 in the first test case of California's Alien Land Law, Frank Miller arranged to have his brother, a prominent attorney, defend him.

"Japan vs. America," announced the headline of a *Los Angeles Times* news article covering the lawsuit. This was not a fight between nations, but the wording indicates the symbolic importance of the issue.

The crux of the state's case was that although Jukichi Harada had put the deed of the house in the name of his citizen children, the purchase was actually for his own personal benefit. California Senator Miguel Estudillo explained the state's position. "If, by decision in this case it is found possible for Japanese aliens to purchase and hold property in the name of minor children who are native born there will be no limit to the amount or nature of the property they can purchase, and no stopping their invasion of any district in any community."

But by the time the case came to trial, the Haradas' presence in the neighborhood had already eroded some of the ill will toward them. Neighbors testifying in court seemingly did more to help the Haradas than hurt them. Even Cynthia Robinson, who had organized the neighborhood committee opposed to the house's sale, testified that the Haradas were "nice people" and kindly, good neighbors.



After World War II, thousands of Japanese-born Americans went through the process of naturalization to become U.S. citizens.

In September of 1918, San Bernardino Superior Court Judge Hugh H. Craig decided the case in the Haradas' favor. Citing the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, he ruled

that the Harada children, born in the United States, could not be denied their rights: "They are American citizens, of somewhat humble station, it may be, but still entitled to equal protection of the laws of our land. ... The political rights of American citizens are the same, no matter what their parentage."

It was a tremendous victory for the Harada family and an important symbolic victory for other Japanese immigrants trying to make their way in America. Judge Craig's ruling, however, did not dismantle the Alien Land Law. In fact, California passed additional land laws trying - unsuccessfully - to close the loophole of deeding property to citizen children. It would take many more court battles, and many more decades, before the U.S. Supreme Court declared the alien land laws in 10 Western states unconstitutional in 1953,

Jukichi Harada's family would grow and prosper in the house on Lemon Street, but in time they would face a far greater threat to their rights. In 1941 - more than two decades after the Haradas' legal victory - war broke out between the United States and Japan. The Haradas were among the 112,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of them U.S. citizens, who were declared enemy aliens and herded into prison camps. Jukichi and Ken Harada were in their 60s at the time and in failing health. Both died behind a barbed wire fence at the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah, 10 months before Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that the internment camps would close.

After the Japanese American prisoners were released, the Harada children scattered to different parts of the country. Only Jukichi and Ken's youngest daughter, Sumi, returned to the house that her father had fought so hard to keep. Sumi opened the house up to Japanese internees who had returned to find that their own homes had been confiscated by the government and their possessions destroyed during the anti Japanese war hysteria. Japanese American families used the Harada house as a way station as they worked to rebuild their lives. Sumi herself remained in the house for the next 50 years, until 1998, when, at the age of 86, poor health forced her to move into a nursing home.

Today, the house on Lemon Street looks much as it did nearly a century ago, when it first caught Jukichi Harada's eye and he imagined his family's future within its solid walls. It stands as a silent sentinel to the history of Japanese men and women's struggle to find their place in America.

"We were born and raised in that house, and twice people tried to take it away from us," says Harold Harada. "The house is meaningful to us; it is proof of what we went through."

In 1991, the house was designated a National Historic Landmark. Harold Harada is certain that his father, were he alive today, would be deeply moved to know his home was of historic importance to the nation he loved so much. There are plans to make it into a small museum dedicated to the Japanese immigrant experience and to Jukichi Harada's battle against California's alien land laws. Although most of Ken and Jukichi's children are now deceased, a museum, Harold hopes, will ensure the preservation of the house on Lemon Street - one man's legacy to his family, and one family's legacy to their country.

Equality Before the Law

The equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, cited in the Harada ruling, has been used as a weapon in thousands of civil rights battles since its enactment in 1868. The clause holds that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." Like the amendment as a whole, this provision was written with ex-slaves in mind, but its language made

the question inevitable: Was it broad enough to protect from discrimination other groups who had been pushed to the margins of American society?

Chinese immigrants - the targets of numerous patently discriminatory laws - were among the first minority groups to put the equal protection clause to the test. One such claim that reached the U.S. Supreme Court was brought by a Chinese business owner named Yick Wo who resided in San Francisco.

Not much is known about the life of Yick Wo. Even his name is the subject of some dispute. We do know that Yick Wo arrived in the United States from China in 1861. He may have been lured by the prospect of mining for gold, or he may have tried to find work on the railroads, like thousands of Chinese who immigrated in the 1800s. Once here, however, they encountered deep prejudice. Laws denied them citizenship and locked them out of certain types of employment. With limited economic opportunities, many Chinese laborers - including Yick Wo - turned to the laundry business.

There, too, they were bombarded with oppressive regulations. One example was a San Francisco ordinance, passed in 1880, that prohibited the operation of a laundry in a wooden building without the consent of the Board of Supervisors.

Yick Wo applied for the renewal of his license in 1885. Although his business had operated in the same location for more than

20 years, and had passed inspections by both the health and fire departments, the Board of Supervisors denied his application.

He may not have been overly surprised. The ordinance was ostensibly a public safety measure, but it became clear that the Board of Supervisors' attention was focused less on the structural composition of the buildings than on the racial composition of the ownership. About 310 of the 320 laundry businesses in the city were housed in wooden buildings. The board denied every one of the approximately 200 applications submitted by Chinese owners, and granted all but one of the approximately 80 submitted by nonChinese owners.

Despite the denial of his application, Yick Wo continued to operate his business. For doing so, he was arrested, convicted and, upon his nonpayment of the fine imposed, he was imprisoned.

He refused to give up, however, and challenged his conviction as a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. His case ultimately came before the U.S. Supreme Court. Without dissent, the court concluded quite simply that the protections of the 14th Amendment were not "confined to the protection of citizens." Its provisions, the court continued, "are universal in their application to all persons within the territorial jurisdiction, without regard to any differences of race, of color, or of nationality."

Finding no reason for the city's denial of Yick Wo's application other than "hostility to [his] race and nationality," the court ruled the ordinance unconstitutional as applied and Yick Wo's conviction unjustified. The court's broad reading of the applicability of the 14th Amendment would benefit not just Yick Wo, who was ordered released from prison, but others outside the White mainstream who were determined to be included in American society on an equal basis.

