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A Closer Look at the Japanese American National Museum

Damon Freeman, Organization of American Historians

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Los Angeles has prided itself as a city living on the edge, always setting the trend for the rest of America. Indeed, it became a magnet for many Americans fleeing Midwestern farms, southern plantations, Indian reservations, and east coast cities searching for a new life. Perhaps more than any other metropolis, L.A. is a city of neighborhoods defined by foreign immigration. One such neighborhood, Little Tokyo, has become the center of an effort to preserve the story of Japanese Americans.

At the heart of this preservation effort is the Japanese American National Museum, the only one of its kind in the United States. Situated inside a long abandoned but recently renovated Buddhist temple, the building dates to 1925 and was used by Japanese immigrants (or Issei) as a house of worship and neighborhood center. During World War II the temple became a storage site for the property of Issei and their native-born children (or Nissei) who had been ordered to internment camps. By 1969, the building had been sold and was destined for demolition.

In 1982, a group of prominent Japanese American businessmen and World War II veterans began exploring the possibility of establishing a museum of the Japanese American experience. By 1985, the Japanese American National Museum was incorporated as a nonprofit institution. With backing from the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, the California State Legislature, and numerous citizen groups, the Museum purchased and renovated the temple, which opened in 1992. Once used as a part of the federal government's plan to remove all Japanese Americans from the West Coast, the temple now preserves stark evidence of one of the darker moments in American history.

Approaching the building on First Street, visitors are greeted by a small red sign hanging above the doorway of the former temple. Next door an 85,000-square-foot pavilion rises from the concrete. Built in 1999, the new pavilion more than doubled the amount of space available to the Museum. Like its older half, the pavilion's galleries feature contemporary Japanese American artists as well as World War II internment exhibits.

Once inside, Museum volunteers welcome visitors and answer their questions. Some of the volunteers lived through World War II and willingly share their experiences. Receiving on average 170,000 visitors annually, the Museum generates a wide variety of emotions. "For Japanese Americans, the history on display reminds them of their experiences or the experiences of their loved ones," says Chris Komai, the Museum's Public Information Manager. "[The

unconstitutional mass incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans by the U.S. government during World War II has an enormous impact on all visitors."

Many of the exhibits on display are quite moving. "Dear Miss Breed: Letters from Camp" chronicles the efforts by Clara Breed, the Children's Librarian at the San Diego Public Library from 1929 to 1945. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent removal of all Japanese Americans living on the West Coast, Breed distributed stamped and addressed postcards to Japanese American children as they were ordered to the San Diego train station. She encouraged them to write her and describe their lives in the camps.

Breed also sent books and care packages to the children. One young writer, Louise Ogawa, spoke of her happiness at receiving a sweater from Breed and described the lack of heat in her Arizona camp schoolroom in the middle of January. Breed held onto the letters and gave them to one of her former correspondents, Elizabeth Yamada. Realizing the significance of these letters, Yamada donated them to the Museum in 1993.

Another exhibit, "The Life and Work of George Hoshida: A Japanese American's Journey," looks at Hoshida, an artist and community leader who lived in Hawaii and was arrested two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. During the next three years, Hoshida was incarcerated at Kilauea Military Camp in Hawaii, Lordsborg and Santa Fe, New Mexico, Jerome, Arkansas, and finally Gila River, Arizona, where Hoshida was released in September 1945.

Hoshida drew many sketches of community life in the various camps. One sketch shows a group of boys playing softball, while another highlights the prison camp-like feel to Lordsborg. His artwork and personal correspondence, deposited at the Museum, provide insight into the many ways that interned Japanese Americans attempted to get on with their lives despite their illegal imprisonment.

Although many of the exhibits at the Museum understandably focus on the World War II experience, others look at Japanese American life both before and after the war. On display now through the OAH meeting is "For a Greener Tomorrow: Japanese American Gardeners in Southern California." The exhibit surveys the contributions made by Japanese American gardeners after they were barred from leasing farmland in southern California during the early 1900s. Other exhibits include "More Than a Game: Sport in the Japanese American Community" and "Allen Say's Journey: The Art and Words of a Children's Book Author."

Like many cultural institutions, the Museum strives to broaden its audience beyond its geographical base. One such initiative is the National School Project (NSP). Beginning in 1993, the NSP created a network of secondary school teachers from around the nation dedicated to furthering multicultural education. It holds workshops, training sessions, and a summer institute that bring teachers together for networking and curriculum development. The Museum has also sponsored traveling exhibitions and has digitized many of its collections. Teachers and scholars

can visit its website (<http://www.janm.org>) to find letters, artwork, photographs, and oral recordings for use in the classroom.

As museums and other cultural institutions have grown during the past few decades, they have become engines for economic and community development. Similar to the original temple which houses the older part of the Museum, much of the surrounding neighborhood had fallen into decay by the 1960s. Little Tokyo, as the area was called, was formed during the 1880s and 1890s as Japanese immigrated to Los Angeles. By the 19308, increasing numbers of Nissei were moving away from the area for the suburbs, and community leaders began organizing Nissei Week as a way of maintaining commercial and cultural links.

The wholesale removal of Japanese Americans emptied the community during World War II, but at the end of the war many Issei and Nissei returned briefly. Like other Americans, returning camp internees joined the nationwide exodus to the suburbs during the 1950s and left Little Tokyo behind. By the 1960s, a number of Japanese Americans became alarmed as the neighborhood's heritage was threatened by commercial development. They resolved to rehabilitate the area, establishing the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project in 1970. In 1986, they succeeded in placing thirteen buildings along First Street (including the temple housing the Museum) on the National Register of Historic Places. Indeed, the Museum not only serves as a preservation site for Japanese Americans, but combines with the surrounding area to form a larger community of Japanese American heritage in Los Angeles.

As a part of the redevelopment of Little Tokyo, commercial developers are required to commit a half percent of the cost of new projects for landscaping or public art. As a result, building and park entrances around the neighborhood feature visual amenities that transmit the cultural heritage of Japanese Americans. In a sense, the entire neighborhood acts as a museum.

For example, a bronze sculpture of Japanese American photographer Toyo Miyatake's camera sits outside the Japanese American National Museum. Miyatake opened a studio in Little Tokyo in 1923 and was later interned at Manzanar Camp during World War II, He smuggled a camera into the camp and secretly recorded his experiences for posterity. Fifty years later, a bronze replica of Miyatake's camera projects images of his work onto a window of the Museum, allowing pedestrians to experience some of the Museum's exhibits without actually entering the building.

The Japanese American National Museum has clearly become a success story in its short history as a cultural institution. While retaining the primary sources so necessary to the work of academic historians, it also functions to "stir emotions in visitors to help create a greater interest in American history," says Komai, "While our mission is to preserve and tell the story of Americans of Japanese ancestry as an integral part of U.S. history, this won't do much good if people don't come and they don't remember. And people are more likely to remember if they feel some emotion while learning."

The Museum is located at 369 East First Street in Los Angeles, about a five-minute cab ride from the Westin Bonaventure Hotel. An OAH shuttle will provide transportation from the hotel on Saturday, 28 April. It is also accessible through public transportation via the DASH shuttle or the Los Angeles MTA bus. On weekdays, take the DASH Route. A shuttle, which runs every five minutes from 6:30 A.M. to 6:30 P.M.; on weekends take the Discovery Route shuttle, which runs every twenty minutes from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. The cost is twenty-five cents. Meeting participants can also take the #434 MTA bus for a higher fee. Complete schedules for both services are available at <http://www.mta.net> and <http://www.ladottransit.com>.

The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and Thursday 10:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Admission costs $6.00 for adults and $3.00 for children under seventeen and students with J.D. For more information, visit their website at <http://www.janm.org> or call (213)625-0414.