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THE HOUSTON CHAPTER OF THE JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE

Danielle Matsumoto

“Japanese-Texans? Who would have ever thought there was any significant Japanese American activity away from either of the coasts?”¹ (Stephen K. Sano)

The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) was founded in 1929 and continues to exist today as “the oldest and largest Asian American civil rights organization in the United States.”² Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and U.S. entry into World War II, politicians and government officials voiced their growing concerns about the loyalties of Japanese Americans. These concerns fueled the argument that the mass internment of Japanese Americans was a matter of “military necessity.” Lieutenant General J.L. DeWitt of the Western Defense Command argued, “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration... To conclude otherwise is to expect that children born of white parents on Japanese soil sever all racial affinity and become loyal Japanese subjects, ready to fight and if necessary die for Japan in a war against the nation of their parents.”³ To combat these beliefs, JACL National Secretary Mike Masaoka testified before Congress in 1942 to affirm that Japanese Americans “think, feel and act like Americans” and that they would be willing to cooperate with Executive Order 9066 to demonstrate their willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of America.⁴ This official JACL position was naturally controversial among Japanese Americans, as Masaoka had agreed to the validity of mass internment. In the years following the war, however, various local chapters of the JACL – most notably the Seattle chapter – would take leadership in mobilizing a grassroots campaign for reparations from the U.S. government for the injustices of wartime internment. This paper seeks to highlight the Houston chapter of the JACL as an alternative model of Japanese American civic and community engagement.

In 1976, there were 102 chapters of the Japanese American Citizens League (“JACL”) located throughout the West Coast as well as in places as varied as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Las Vegas and New Mexico. One of the newest chapters, located in Houston, had just been founded in 1975, although Japanese had been present in Texas as early as 1902. While the leadership

and activism of the Seattle JACL are well-documented and celebrated, the experiences of smaller chapters based in regions with sparser Japanese American populations have received little attention in historical literature. Although the Seattle chapter played a critical role in the movement for redress and reparations, its story is not entirely representative of the experiences of all Japanese Americans in the post-war period. A complete picture of the meaning of Japanese American ethnic identity requires an examination of other Japanese American communities, an example of which is the Houston JACL. In studying the Houston chapter, it becomes evident that this group did not experience the same level of political controversy and aggressive action as the Seattle JACL, especially during the campaign for redress and reparations. In various instances, the Houston JACL would propose a new model of Japanese American activism, one which emphasized a history of good citizenship and friendly relations between Japanese American and the local non-Japanese community.

I. The Seattle JACL

The Seattle chapter has been celebrated as the first Japanese American community to “break the silence” about internment and shake off “pejoratives” such as “quiet Americans” and “model minority” that had plagued the Nisei and Sansei since the end of World War II.⁵ In Shimabukuro’s narrative, the Seattle redress movement grew out of the increasingly widespread belief that Japanese Americans had been treated as second-class citizens due to their own reluctance to assert their rights. Presumably, this timidity was the result of the horrific experience of wartime internment and the high stakes that had subsequently been placed on assimilation into American society. The story of Henry Miyatake, a leader in the Seattle chapter’s early efforts for redress, portrays a restless man frustrated with what he saw as Nisei submissiveness. In addition to having been failed out of high school for writing an angry paper about racism in America, Miyatake had endured the humiliation of his manager reading aloud Mike Masaoka’s Japanese American Creed right before announcing a pay cut. Mike Masaoka, former secretary of the national JACL, had read the Japanese American Creed when testifying before Congress in 1941 on the loyalty of Japanese Americans. The Japanese American Creed’s overly humble language reflects the position taken by the national JACL at the time that Japanese Americans should cooperatively go to internment camp in order to prove their patriotism. In reading the Creed, Miyatake’s manager was clearly mocking him as a meek Japanese American who was willing to endure any level of humiliation to be

accepted. This experience, Shimabukuro writes, “only reinforced [Miyatake’s] conviction that something had to be done about the perceptions of Nikkei in the United States.”⁶ In the narrative of the Seattle-led redress movement, the self-effacing attitude reflected in the Japanese American Creed and promoted by community leaders such as Masaoka was preventing people of Japanese descent from gaining respect in American society. The redress movement logically arose from this sentiment. Driven by this rebellious spirit, the Seattle chapter undertook pioneering initiatives such as the traveling exhibit *Japanese Pride and Shame*. The exhibit toured the Northwest in the early 1970s, several years before the redress movement would push the history of internment into the consciousness of mainstream America. *Pride and Shame* included cultural artifacts, such as a poem written by a Sansei, as well as exhibits on darker topics, such as discrimination, Yellow Peril, and Executive Order 9066. The organizers did not hesitate to represent the unjust conditions Japanese Americans had endured during the war despite their American citizenship, and the exhibit included a model of a typical internment camp barracks.⁷ Shimabukuro interprets *Pride and Shame* as “the community’s first step toward exposing what most felt to be a painful personal experience very rarely displayed to their own children.”⁸

The first Day of Remembrance, held in 1978, has also been identified as an immensely transformative, emotional, and empowering moment for Seattle Japanese Americans. Takezawa writes, “This first Day of Remembrance thus broke the silence that had lasted for nearly forty years and was a turning point in the national movement to seek an apology and monetary redress.”⁹ She further describes former internees as to the victims of a Freudian amnesia who kept their painful memories of betrayal by their own government “repressed” in their “subconscious.”¹⁰ In her chapter on the Nisei experience, Takezawa draws upon interview evidence to conclude that “the great majority [of Nisei] did not talk about internment to anyone, except perhaps to mention the friends they met in camp. Their memories of evacuation and internment were so painful that many Nisei shut them out of their minds.”¹¹ Mass’s description of the psychological effects of internment is consistent with this view, comparing the U.S. government to abusive parents and the Japanese American community to an abused child: “When abusive parents acknowledge that they have done wrong, it allows children to feel safe and to examine their true feelings about reality...denial and rationalization are no longer necessary defenses. Japanese Americans can feel an inner sense of honor and integrity that is validated and confirmed by the larger society.”¹²

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Takezawa argues that through the catharsis of the Days of Remembrance, the favorable media coverage of these events, and finally the support for them in Congress, “ethnic pride” was restored to the Japanese American community and its members were finally able to tell their stories to their children. In the Seattle narrative, prior to the chapter’s leadership in seeking redress and raising awareness of the Japanese American experience, Japanese Americans had shared a sense of shame of their heritage and a reluctance to demand justice. Following high profile public events such as the Days of Remembrance, reconciliation with one’s ethnic and cultural background was finally possible.

In 1983, while the national Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Citizens was still conducting hearings and formulating its recommendations, Seattle activists successfully fought for redress at the state level for Japanese American state employees who had been unfairly terminated during the war.¹³ This campaign was led by the Community Committee on Redress/Reparations, which had grown out of the Seattle JACL, three other local JACL chapters, local Japanese American churches, the Nisei Veterans Committee, and other community groups in response to the need to prepare citizens to testify before the CWRIC.¹⁴ The concentrated effort by the CCRR, which later renamed itself the Washington Coalition on Redress, achieved its goals relatively quickly, with less than a year passing from the conception of the idea to the passage of the bill. The state level campaign essentially followed the same pattern as the redress campaign at the national level, including research, testimony, lobbying, and the recruitment of legislator champions, except at a much accelerated speed. Later, the WCR would draw upon the same networks in its campaign for redress for former public school employees.¹⁵ In the Seattle story, the redress movement and associated displays of pride in Japanese American culture and history were a major part of the healing process and the assertion of Japanese American equality. The Seattle chapter is characterized as a pioneering community whose activism set important precedents for the process of seeking redress at the national level.

Another theme in the Seattle story is the chapter’s incessant conflict with the more conservative national JACL. When Miyatake’s “Seattle Plan,” which called for individual redress payments, was presented before the JACL national board in 1974, the response was underwhelming – even insulting, according to Miyatake, whose hour and a half presentation timeslot was cut down to a mere thirty minutes.¹⁶ According to Seattle activists, other JACL

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leaders took credit for the movement to rescind Executive Order 9066 when they had not been involved.¹⁷ Even after the redress resolution was accepted at the national level in 1976, problems remained: while the Seattle chapter was committed to individual redress payments, many others in the JACL, including Mike Masaoka, hoped to direct redress money to Japanese American community organizations. The conflict escalated to the point that “the Seattle chapter was ready to pull out he National.”¹⁸ Further controversy ignited over the formation of a congressional commission on redress, an idea suggested by Japanese American members of Congress and promoted by the national JACL. Although Seattle members eventually did testify in the congressional hearings, the Seattle Evacuation Redress Committee initially resisted on the grounds that Japanese Americans should demand more immediate legislative action which would bypass the arduous, dilatory process required by the congressional commission.¹⁹ Even the first Day of Remembrance, during which Japanese Americans returned to the Puyallup fairgrounds to re-enact the World War II evacuation order, failed to avoid conflict with the national organization. Although the Seattle organizers received compliments on the success of the event, a letter from JACL’s National Committee for Redress scolded them for neglecting to feature leaders of the national organization as speakers and giving “the impression that the Redress campaign is a local issue involving primarily the Seattle area.”²⁰

The Seattle chapter was a controversial group, and its histories create the impression that the national JACL was an inhibitor of progress that was unresponsive to swelling grassroots advocacy. In fact, in the early days of the redress movement, such grassroots support was geographically limited. A survey of JACL chapters sent out by Seattle in 1975-1976 led to the conclusion that 94.4 percent supported the passage of legislation featuring monetary redress. These results, however, came from a subset of only 40 percent of the chapters in existence at the time.²¹ The reality was that only about 38 percent of chapters were both supportive of redress and interested enough in the issue to return the Seattle chapter’s survey. The Seattle chapter was also the only one among all JACL chapters to oppose the commission approach to achieving redress at the national level.²² The activism, controversy and fierce debate that enveloped the Seattle chapter made it unusual among its peers.

II. The Houston JACL, 1975-1990

The Houston chapter of the JACL was founded just as Miyatake was beginning to promote his plan for individual reparations in 1975. This

chapter was started mainly with cultural and social goals in mind. Toshio and Lily Matsumoto, two of the founding members of the chapter, had moved to Houston in 1973 because of Toshio's job with engineering firm Bechtel. They recount:

As we settled in Houston we started to get acquainted with the Japanese-American community...Shell had recently moved their headquarters to Houston and consolidated most of their activity in Houston so there were many Niseis who were employed by Shell and became permanent residents of Houston. As we got to know all these people, we gathered at our home one night and discussed the possibility of organizing a Japanese-American group primarily for social activities and as a secondary function to get involved in local cultural activities, similar to what the Chinese community in Houston were doing. The Chinese had a huge population in Houston and were well organized culturally and politically. We felt it important that our organization provide educational and cultural programs to increase public awareness and understanding of Japanese-Americans.²³

Several points of this narrative are especially noteworthy. First, despite the fact that the Japanese American population in Texas was very small, Japanese Americans gravitated toward the same social circles and came to associate with one another. This contradicts the assertion that "in reaction to American society's confusion of Japanese Americans with the Japanese in Japan, the Nisei tried to emphasize their American identity and minimize their Japanese."²⁴ Indeed, as Fugita and O'Brien discovered, the rate of involvement in voluntary associations among Japanese Americans was higher in places where Japanese Americans were fewer in number.²⁵ The Houston JACL's participation in an annual Asian Culture Festival in San Antonio, where members "sold [and] prepared Japanese food," further shows that the mostly Nisei chapter membership did not shy away from their ethnic identity.²⁶ Moreover, the Houston chapter maintained good relations with the Japanese consulate in Houston. Members were invited to New Year's gatherings at the Consul's residence and the Consul spoke at the Annual Houston JACL Installation Banquet.²⁷ This voluntary association with representatives of the Japanese government further complicates the view of Nisei as reluctant to associate themselves with Japan prior to the national movement for redress of the 1980s.

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The composition of Houston JACL membership reveals both the openness of the chapter towards welcoming non-Japanese as well as the importance of chapter activities in the minds of its members. The program of the 1985 “Go for Broke” banquet, held in honor of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, includes a short introduction to the Houston JACL, which ends with the statement, “The JACL of Houston welcomes Americans and non-Americans, Asians and non-Asians, Japanese Americans and non-Japanese Americans alike into its membership to further its goals.”²⁸ The 1976 membership list includes many non-Japanese surnames among the many Japanese ones, and several of the couples listed appear to have been interracial marriages.²⁹ When asked about the non-Japanese members, Matsumoto explains, “We had many veterans of WWII who married Japanese nationals and were interested in our activity. Many Caucasian members joined because they were somehow involved with the Japanese-Americans during WWII or prior, such as Ms. Cecile Lancaster who was a teacher at one of the War Relocation Centers.”³⁰ At the same time, Japanese nationals were less involved:

There was a group of Japanese nationals who were residents of Houston because of their business affiliation with Japanese firms that had established offices and facilities in Houston. These people never joined because the women were more interested in learning American recreational games such as golf, tennis, playing bridge, etc. before they returned to Japan.³¹

The fact that the Houston JACL was not limited to Japanese American members shows that ethnicity in this case was a loose category. Nevertheless, the diverse membership does not support the image of the Nisei attempting to assimilate completely into American society in the spirit of the Japanese American Creed. Instead, the borders of the Japanese American community expanded to include all those who were interested in the same goals, enhancing the reach and influence of the organization.

Indeed, the strong interest and high levels of dedication demonstrated by the Houston chapter’s members show that the opportunity to socialize and work with other Japanese Americans was a high priority. Matsumoto describes:

With regard to membership, since we were the first group of its kind in Texas, as word got around the area of our existence, we were swamped with new member applications.

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People from nearby cities and towns such as San Antonio, Killeen, Humble, Orange, Hidalgo, Spring, Temple, etc. were writing us inquiries and eventually joined. We kept changing meeting places as the membership grew.³²

Many of the members lived a significant distance away from Houston, and would have had to drive at least a few hours to attend meetings and JACL functions. Matsumoto describes how “wealthy farmers such as Henry and Elsie Kawahata...used to fly into Houston from Hidalgo in their private plane to make our meetings.”³³ The image of Japanese Americans as “quiet Americans” lacking in ethnic affiliation is further complicated by the flood of interest and extreme levels of dedication that Japanese Texans demonstrated towards the organization. Voluntary association is one way of indicating the importance one sees in maintaining contact, organizing, and socializing with those who have common interests and experiences.

The Houston JACL remained relatively distant from the political controversies that enveloped the redress movement throughout its course. Matsumoto remembers, “We got started with the Redress movement when the National JACL got going and formed their Legislative Education Committee (LEC). A good friend...was on that committee and he sent us form letters and names of Congressmen who were specifically interested in the Redress program.”³⁴ As the LEC was not formed until 1985, almost ten years passed between the founding of the Houston chapter and its first active engagement in the redress movement. Once Houston members received information and instructions from the JACL LEC, however, “all members started writing letters to those Congressmen in Washington in earnest. They did not need any motivation to send these letters because most of us knew what it meant to get Congressmen on our side.”³⁵ Writing to congressmen in support of the bill was seen as more or less self-evident, part of one’s duty as a member of the Japanese American community. Unlike the Seattle chapter, the Houston chapter would not become embroiled in debates over the formation of a congressional commission and the choice between individual or community reparations payments.

Nor would events like the Days of Remembrance have the dramatic emotional impact on the Houston Japanese American community:

The Days of Remembrance movement had not quite got going in Houston or in many of the other cities until the mid 80’s. When we came to Sacramento in 1988 we started to hear about it but it did not arouse much interest in

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Lily or myself. I think we attended one of their functions here in Sacramento which was highlighted by a notable speaker from the city government along with displays of memorabilia from camp days and meeting some old friends. These meetings are still being held occasionally here in Sacramento but we have had no desire to attend. We felt that those camp days are way in the past and we just couldn't get interested.³⁶

Houston JACL members contributed to the redress movement without having experienced the “catharsis” of the Days of Remembrance, which Takezawa and Shimabukuro see as such a turning point in the Seattle redress movement. When the Matsumotos later did attend related events after moving back to the West Coast, they did so more as a way to reconnect with old friends, as opposed to out of political interest. This did not mean, however, that Houston members were completely “silent” about the internment experience – indeed, the Matsumotos recall speaking with their children:

One day at Glen's High School this subject came up and the teacher asked Glen if he would give a talk on the subject. He came home and we filled him in on all the details of the forced evacuation, the incarceration in the relocation camps, etc. He went back to give the talk to the students (the teacher opened up the class so two different classes could hear this speech) and Glen said the audience was completely enthralled by the talk and he said you could hear a pin drop.³⁷

The effect of the Days of Remembrance appears to have been exaggerated. Monumental public events such as the Days of Remembrance were not necessary to “break the silence” because there had never been complete silence in the first place. Even though Houston did not experience dramatic re-enactments of internment, media attention, and political controversy, internment was not a taboo topic.

Matsumoto recalls the slow progress of the redress bill, which has been highlighted in histories written about the redress movement. As Hatamiya indicates, many obstacles faced by the redress bill seemed overwhelming, from the heavy concentration of Japanese Americans in a limited number of congressional districts, to the relative lack of political activity among Japanese Americans, to the struggle to find consensus on the best approaches to

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redress.³⁸ In addition, the number of Japanese Americans eligible to receive reparations was smaller than the total population of Japanese Americans. Hawaiians, considered to be the group of Japanese Americans with the most influence over their elected officials, had no direct stake in the passage of the redress bill.³⁹ Perhaps more importantly, there were many junctures in the legislative process at which the bill could be stopped, sometimes by a single House subcommittee chairperson.⁴⁰ Despite the recent victories in the Title II and Tokyo Rose campaigns, there were still many reasons to doubt the possibility of the achievement of redress. Many Japanese Americans, especially those located farther from the controversy and activism of Seattle, thus, failed to see themselves as driving forces behind the redress movement. This perception persisted even as they continued to write to their congressmen in support of it.

The Houston JACL did play a part in a few local political issues at the time of the redress movement. Although Matsumoto remembers that “most of the non-Japanese Houston community were very supportive of our efforts, especially the native Texans who were familiar with the Japanese soldiers of the 442nd RCT,” there was at least one incident in which discrimination became an issue.

A Japanese-American...was assigned as a teacher at one of the schools in the Houston area and when they found out that she was of Japanese descent they fired her. Her name was Betty Waki and she approached our JACL chapter and asked for help. We felt that if word was sent to the School from our JACL headquarters it would present a stronger case. So we asked JACL headquarters to intervene and sure enough Betty was reinstated as a full time teacher.⁴¹

Following this incident, Betty Waki would get involved in the Houston JACL's activities and eventually serve as president, from 1985-1986 and again from 1991-1997.⁴² In this intervention by the Houston JACL, the organization fulfilled their mission to “secure justice and equal opportunities for Americans of Japanese ancestry as well as for all individuals regardless of their race, creed, color or national origin.”⁴³ However, the effort to reinstate Betty Waki significantly differed from the efforts of the Washington Coalition on Redress, which had aimed to secure apologies and monetary reparations in the name of historical injustices faced by Washington state and school employees. As described by Daniel Watanabe, president of the Houston chapter from 1982-1984, the focus of the Houston JACL continued to

be social activities, such as bowling or golfing. Despite the fact that some members, including Watanabe, had been involved in activism as part of anti-nuclear and anti-war efforts, the chapter's involvement in civil rights and minority issues remained very limited.⁴⁴ The activist spirit with which many of the younger members had grown up did not necessarily carry over into JACL activities.

III. The Use of Historical Narrative in Houston JACL Activism, 1990-2004

Although the Houston JACL continued to become involved in local political issues, the chapter's tradition of emphasizing a history of friendship between Japanese and Texans strongly contrasts with the combative activism of the Seattle chapter's redress movement. The goodwill towards Japanese Americans in Texas has been partially attributed to widespread knowledge of the valiant acts of the all-Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team, whose members had saved the so-called "Lost Battalion," or the 141st Infantry Regiment of the 36th Texas Division in 1944. The story of the 442nd RCT has been told in multiple volumes and media types, but it held special significance in Texas since the surviving members of the Lost Battalion later proclaimed the 442nd RCT "honorary Texans" and presented them with a silver plaque.⁴⁵ The Houston JACL chose to highlight this important chapter of the relationship between Texans and Japanese Americans with the Go for Broke Project, an initiative organized by Betty Waki that included the Go for Broke Banquet, held in 1985. The banquet featured an invocation by the former chaplain of the 36th Texas Division and a speech by Chester Tanaka, who had served in the 442nd RCT and authored a book on the subject.⁴⁶ The Houston JACL has continued to celebrate the special relationship between the 442nd RCT and the 36th Texas Division, as seen in the Homecoming for Heroes Tribute Dinner held in November 2009 in honor of the 65th anniversary of the rescue.⁴⁷ At this event, surviving members of both the 442nd RCT and the Texas Division were reunited. Japanese American congressmen Daniel Inouye and Norman Mineta, both of whom had been instrumental in the legislative fight for redress at the national level, spoke to the audience. In its coverage of the reunion, the *Houston Chronicle* referred to the "now legendary 442nd" which had "developed their fearsome reputation as a respected fighting force" in action in North Africa and Italy. The Texas Division viewed the Tribute Dinner as an opportunity to once again thank the Nisei soldiers for their bravery – as 88-year-old Astro Tortolano told the *Chronicle*, "I've never forgotten how they saved us."⁴⁸ Unlike chapters

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such as the Seattle JACL, whose histories exude a sense of outrage at the injustices and exclusion faced by Japanese Americans on the West Coast, the Houston chapter has followed a tradition of highlighting the positive ties between Japanese Americans and non-Japanese Texans, providing a noteworthy alternative picture of the Japanese American experience and interracial relations.

An effort to portray a long-standing friendship between Japanese Americans and non-Japanese Texans is directly evident in the Houston JACL's distinctive approach to activism since the achievement of redress. In February 2003, Representative Howard Coble, a Republican from North Carolina and then-chairman of the House Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, made controversial comments on a radio show about the rationale for Japanese American internment during World War II. While discussing the hypothetical detention of Arab-Americans with a caller, Coble stated that during World War II, Japanese Americans had become "an endangered species," arguing that "it wasn't safe for them to be on the street." He continued, "Some [Japanese Americans] were intent on doing harm to us, just as some of these Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us."⁴⁹

The Houston JACL responded within a week of the radio show with indignant letters to Representative Coble as well as to Tom DeLay and Chris Bell, then the representatives of Texas's twenty-second and twenty-fifth congressional districts, which cover Houston and surrounding areas. In their letter to Coble, JACL members pointed out that it would have been illogical for Japanese Americans to be released to serve in the military during World War II if they had been in danger, adding, "Are you aware of the Japanese-American, 442 Infantry Regiment Combat Team (442nd RCT) often referred to as 'Go For Broke,' that lost so many lives rescuing the 'Lost' Battalion from Texas?"⁵⁰ The Houston JACL invoked a well-known story of Japanese American heroism that had become an integral part of this specific community's identity and its sense of belonging in the state of Texas. The authors of the letters to DeLay and Bell also emphasized the conservative political orientation of many Houston JACL members, stating, "The Houston Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League has many of its members as your constituents. We therefore ask you to seek an apology from Coble. We must reject the view that any American citizen or legal resident should be imprisoned and restricted based solely on ethnicity."⁵¹ George Hirasaki, the president of the Houston chapter, and

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Sut Oishi, chairman of the chapter's Scholarship Committee, also identified themselves as Republicans in their signatures of the letter. The Houston chapter's strategy of showcasing the strong roots of Japanese Americans in Texas and identifying themselves as Republican constituents reflects the unique character and history of the Houston JACL.

A tendency towards consensus-building and the promotion of Japanese American contributions to Texan society emerged in the Houston chapter's response to the Jap Road controversy. The issue of offensive road names had surfaced in the 1990s, but inspired little interest among JACL members. As Watanabe describes, "It took a little while to motivate the chapter members. It was not a motivating issue back then. It became an issue once it looked like we might be able to get the name changed."⁵² Collecting signatures for a petition to change the names of the roads proved a difficult task, and in the end, only about 25 out of 90 Houston JACL members signed. Of the total of 2,000 signatures Watanabe obtained, the overwhelming majority were from non-JACL members, personal contacts of Watanabe's, and non-Texans.⁵³ Meanwhile, both Houston JACL members and non-members continued to advocate for the names to be changed. In December 2003, working independently of the chapter, Sandra Nakata Tanamachi and Thomas Kuwahara filed a discrimination complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation and Department of Housing and Urban Development asking for federal funding to Jefferson County to be withheld until the roads received new names. The Houston JACL responded with a more cautious, conciliatory statement:

The Houston Chapter of JACL does not endorse this approach. We have informed Scott Newar, National JACL and Reuters News Service that our approach is to compile family histories of the pioneering families and encourage the local organizations to take the initiative in renaming the roads to honor the pioneering families. The history of Yoshio Mayumi has been placed on the JACL website and we will continue to advocate renaming Jap Road as Mayumi Road to honor the pioneering family. Jap Lane in Orange County was not mentioned in the complaint. We have corresponded with the Orange County Historical Society and offered the family stories we have compiled on our website.⁵⁴

The Houston JACL sought to rectify the offensive road names by educating

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the community on the history of Japanese Americans who settled in Texas, with the hope that a better understanding of the historical figures behind the names would inspire residents to rename the roads more appropriately. The chapter intended to work collaboratively with the Orange County Historical Society to find a better name for the road, although, as reported in a subsequent position statement, this effort largely failed.⁵⁵

In their conciliatory approach to combating the use of racial slurs, the Houston JACL made an attempt to acknowledge the feelings expressed by the local community. As reported in the *New York Times*, opponents of the name change adamantly stated, “We’re not here to bash the Japanese,” adding, “If we change the name, we’re conceding to the idea that it was meant the wrong way -- and it wasn’t.”⁵⁶ As described by George Hirasaki, president of the Houston JACL since 2002, the unfavorable media attention generated by the controversy had incensed the residents of the road: “We had a smaller meeting before the court hearing with the local people and it was kind of like talking to a brick wall... [the residents] kept saying how they weren’t racists... They just didn’t like outsiders telling them what to do.”⁵⁷ Even some family members of Houston JACL members felt strongly that the name should not be changed. For example, although Hirasaki’s grandfather had been one of the Japanese American residents of the road that later came to be called Jap Lane, his Caucasian sister-in-law stubbornly opposed the name change, as she believed this would send the wrong message that the original intent of the non-Japanese residents had been racist. The disagreement caused “a real division in the family.”⁵⁸

In light of these local pressures and concerns, the Houston JACL attempted to take a more cooperative approach and absorb the campaign against the Jap Roads as an extension of the ongoing “100 Years of Japanese Texans” project, which centered on the idea that Japanese Americans, like other Texans, had strong roots in the area. In the vocabulary of Tsukuda’s work, the Houston JACL’s goal was to portray Japanese Americans as part of the “local community,” as opposed to the “national community” that was persisting in labeling the Beaumont area as “an area of racists.”⁵⁹ Although the names of the roads were eventually changed, residents bypassed the Houston JACL’s choice of the name “Mayumi Road,” after the wealthy Japanese landowner and entrepreneur who had owned a farm in the area. Instead, they chose the name “Boondocks Road.” This choice was a reaction to the humiliation the community felt it suffered at the hands of national media and activists.

IV. Conclusion

The study of the Japanese American experience through the lens of the Houston JACL gives a different picture of Japanese America than previous studies undertaken from the perspective of the better-known Seattle chapter. The historical narrative of the Japanese Texan experience is noticeably distinctive from that of Japanese Americans on the West Coast: there was no mass internment order in Texas, and a unique relationship formed between the Japanese American community and the state of Texas because of the heroics of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Like many JACL chapters, the Houston chapter was founded primarily for social and cultural reasons, and would become involved in politics only later. The focus of the chapter's political involvement would remain mostly local, and the controversies and debates surrounding the redress and reparations movement would remain distant, even as Houston members wrote letters to congressmen in support of the bill. When the Houston JACL did choose to take a stance on certain political issues, the strategy would be to showcase the longstanding history of Japanese American contributions to Texan communities, bypassing more aggressive campaign tactics. The Houston JACL neither spearheaded the redress movement nor became an aggressive spokesperson for Japanese American rights, but its story and that of other JACL chapters nevertheless deserve to be included in the history of the Japanese American experience.

¹ Steven K. Sano, "Japanese in TEXAS?" *Nichi Bei Times*, January 1, 2003.

² Japanese American Citizens League, "About the Japanese American Citizens League," <http://www.jacl.org/about/about.htm>

³ J.L. DeWitt, "Memorandum: Subject: Evacuation of Japanese and Other Subversive Persons From the Pacific Coast," February 13, 1942, in Daniels, Roger, ed., *American Concentration Camps*, Vol. 2: January 1, 1942.

⁴ "Testimony of Mike Masaoka, National Security and Field Executive, Japanese American Citizens League," in U.S. Congress, House Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, *Hearings* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 11138.

⁵ Chizu Omori, "Foreword," in Robert Shimabukuro, *Born in Seattle: The Campaign for Japanese American Redress* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

⁶ Shimabukuro, 13.

⁷ Shimabukuro, 5.

⁸ Shimabukuro, 11.

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⁹ Yasuko I. Takezawa, *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.

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