



Photo 1 – Betty and Fujiye Fujimoto dressed for Obon parade. Isleton, circa 1935. Courtesy of Betty Kashiwagi.

Photo 2 - The town of Isleton prepares for the annual Asparagus Festival. Isleton, 1928. Courtesy of Anne Hoshiko Akabori.

## History Forgotten, Isleton’s Japantown

By Jill Shiraki, *Nichi Bei Weekly*, New Year’s Edition, January 1, 2010

Unfamiliar with the Sacramento Delta region but lured by Japantown lore and a faint recollection of actor-comedian Pat Morita claiming his roots in Isleton, my family and I visited the riverfront town. Driving the two blocks of Main Street, we easily found Chinatown with its distinctive architecture and remnants of Chinese characters on signage and in building windows, but saw nothing telling of any former Japanese American presence. Perplexed, we stopped to admire the dedication to Isleton’s Chinese American community and seated ourselves next to the Chinese pagoda to enjoy our bento lunch.

Similar to other Delta towns, Isleton grew with the rich peat soil from the river, ideal for agriculture and prides itself as the “Asparagus Capital of the World”. In 1919, Thomas Foon Chew founded Bayside Cannery at Isleton and brought his processing experience to the Delta, becoming the first to package green asparagus. In the early 1900s, the Japanese laborers followed the path to the Delta. Through hardwork and dexterity, the Japanese comprised 31.7% of the agricultural labor force in the region by 1910, nearing the 41.5% whites and exceeding the 24.9% Chinese. At its peak, Isleton had five canneries, including industry leaders, H.J. Heinz Company and Libby, McNeil, and Libby.

To conduct research for *Preserving California's Japantowns*, I returned several years later with a Sanborn insurance map and Japanese American News 1941 Directory and discovered that the Chinese pagoda and park was in fact located in the Japanese section of Isleton. By 1941, the Japantown had 12 boarding houses, 5 stores, 2 pool halls, 3 fish markets, 2 restaurants, a tofu store, barber, bathhouse, and liquor store. There was a Buddhist Church, a Japanese school, a Christian church, and 10 other Japanese organizations. While we now had a vague idea of building use from the map, we still could not match the Japanese shopkeepers listed with P.O. Box addresses to the historic buildings. On another research trip, my colleague Donna Graves discovered the former Buddhist Church at 409 F Street, now the All Nations Church of God.

For our recent visit, we were eager to share the Delta ghost towns with Tom Ikeda and Dana Hoshide of Densho, who are collaborating with us on oral history interviews. We were excited to finally identify the in tact storefronts and Japanese family businesses with a hand-drawn map by former resident Irene (Toyota) Hoshiko, a connection made by Janet Sakata of the Walnut Grove History Project. We noted the former Fujimoto Boarding House and Boot Store at 54 Main Street, with its glass windows tastefully filled with jewelry and gift items to promote Aunt Shirley's & Ashley's Arts, Etc. Charlene Anderson of the Isleton Brannan-Andrus Historical Society met with us and confirmed the little-known history of Japantown, by her familiarity with only three family businesses documented of the 30 plus listings in the directory. In efforts to revitalize the town, other former Japantown storefronts now feature antiques, art galleries, framing services, and gift stores. Gone are any markings of the boarding houses, barber, bathhouse, tofu, and fish market of the self-contained pre-World War II Japantown, yet the buildings remain as hollow reminders of its past.

In the Chinese section, Anderson shared with us the plans to restore as a museum, the Bing Kong Tong Association building, featured on the PBS "History Detective" in 2008, that now dons a bright hand-painted mural by local students. A few doors down, we peered into the former Chinese bait shop, dry goods store, and provider of local town news, to see the renovation in progress for the future home of the historical society. Located amidst these two sites, we stopped in to meet Jean Yokotobi, a current proprietor

of the deli at 24 Main Street, who attends the Walnut Grove Buddhist Church and may be able to help the lost history of Isleton's Japantown find new footing.

Behind the current location of the Chinese pagoda and park, formerly stood the Japanese Hall, adjacent to the sumo mound, basketball court, and baseball diamond. While the vibrant Japantown of the 1930s, filled with community picnics, relays, and parades, remains invisible, the stories shared by Betty Fujimoto Kashiwagi, in an oral history interview, begins to recreate its aura. As the sixth child in a family of 5 boys and 3 girls, Betty, born in 1929, had little responsibility. While her father Tokuhei Fujimoto worked in the fields farming, and her mother Tama was busy managing the boarding house and boot store, she spent her idle time roaming Japantown. She reflects back, "My friend had to help at the family restaurant, but my only job was to empty the trash cans in the boarding house. I visited the different shops . . . I guess I was a curious child."

As though time stood still, Betty's eyes lit up as she vividly recounts her visits to the Shusho Tofu-ya and described "the blocks of tofu floating like riverboats". One day, while she was sitting on the counter watching Mr. Washiyu repair shoes, a Caucasian customer entered the store, and after picking up her order and paying her bill, the customer handed Betty five cents. "She must have thought I was a poor waif, but I was excited and ran across the street to buy myself a piece of candy." In the close-knit Japantown, her mother never worried as everyone kept a watchful eye over the children.

Fearing the Chinese gambling houses, Betty remembers walking in the middle of the street on her way to the Isleton Union Oriental School, where she joined her Chinese and Japanese classmates. As a young girl, she knew the newer brick school across the way was for the whites, but was unaware of the reason for the segregation. Naively, she was excited to leave Isleton for the first time due to the forced evacuation and did not understand the gravity until she faced the crude conditions at the Assembly Center.

Throughout the war years, her spirit was not broken as her mother's strength and resiliency encouraged her to make the best of the situation. Upon her return to Isleton when her parents worked at Bayside Cannery, Betty faced blatant racism from fellow

students and administrators, and boldly spoke out against the unjust treatment. “After camp makes me cry,” she laments, “I had the best mother. I told her everything. She understood and was accepting. She treated everyone the same.” Several of the former shopkeepers also worked in the cannery, but no one returned to Main Street. By 1946, several storefronts were occupied by Filipino businesses, including a nursery, market and soda fountain, grocery and dry goods, barbers, and gas station.

After spending her junior year as a school girl in San Francisco, and her senior year at Rio Vista High School, the Fujimoto family left Isleton to farm strawberries for Driscoll’s in Pajaro Valley. Later, she married Sam Kashiwagi and raised her four children in Sacramento. Yet, her heart remains in Isleton. Betty Kashiwagi helped to organize the annual Isleton Japantown reunions for 25 years, from 1979 to 2004. Unsettled by the forgotten history, she worries that no one will know the Japanese story and not many are left who are willing to share it. She still beams as she reminisces, “For me, life in Isleton was good.”

*Preserving California’s Japantowns* in collaboration with *Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project* is conducting “place-based interviews” to gather first hand knowledge and experience of pre-World War II Japantown community life in the Delta and Central Valley. With the support of Janet Sakata, Gene and Jane Itogawa, Louie Watanabe, and Barbara Takei, interviews of 6 individuals from Walnut Grove and Isleton were conducted in December 2009. Plans are underway to identify potential interviewees of Fresno’s historic Japantown (known locally as Fresno’s Chinatown). To assist, contact Jill Shiraki at (510) 277-2164 or [jshiraki@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jshiraki@sbcglobal.net)