

Transition

In December 1944, the United States government announced it was allowing Japanese Americans to return to the West Coast, starting January 1945. News of their return stirred mixed feelings, particularly since World War II was still raging. The war would continue for another eight months.

Los Angeles County Forest and Fire Warden Spence D. Turner publicly stated he was "unalterably opposed" to their return, as did the American Legion County Council, which passed a resolution strongly opposing the return of the Japanese Americans until the war was over.

On the other hand, the Los Angeles office of the American Civil Liberties Union, applauded the move, saying this recognized the Bill of Rights in time of war as in peace. ^

While some returning Japanese Americans faced threats and violence, there are no known reports in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo. A Jan. 4, 1945 California Eagle editorial even discouraged scapegoating the Japanese Americans and denounced the mainstream media for doing so.

Pilgrim House, through their Common Ground Committee, held a number of African American/Japanese American gatherings to foster better interracial relations, and even temporarily hired Sam Ishikawa on their staff.

Other African American leaders extended small outreach efforts by inviting returning Japanese Americans into their homes. At one informal brunch held at the home of John Allen, four Japanese Americans were the guests of honor - Private Tom Masamori, Ruth Horikawa, Yoneko Gotori and Agnes Ito.

Satoru Uyeda, one of the first Japanese Americans to return and open up a Bronzeville/Little Tokyo business, attempted to foster good business relations by hiring African Americans.

Samuel Evans, African American owner of the Bamboo Room on First and San Pedro streets, also had similar thoughts and hired returning Japanese Americans as waitresses.

During Easter Sunday of 1945, a group of African Americans welcomed a group of returning Japanese Americans with a bouquet of flowers, according to the Chicago Defender, an African American newspaper.

The Los Angeles Tribune, a Los Angeles-based African American newspaper, put out an employment ad in the Pacific Citizen, the newspaper for the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Award-winning writers Hisaye Yamamoto, would be one of three Japanese Americans hired at the Tribune. Award-winning writer Wakako Yamauchi babysat the children of Almena Lomax, Tribune publisher and editor. Later, Crossroads, a Japanese American publication, was printed at the Tribune plant.

Once the war ended in August 1945, most of the United States confinement camps closed down and more Japanese Americans returned to the West Coast, accelerating the transition of Bronzeville back to Little Tokyo.

In a November 1945 issue of the JACL Reporter, an additional wartime publication to JACL's Pacific Citizen newspaper, Saburo Kido, JACL president, wrote about his visit to Bronzeville/Little Tokyo.

"Los Angeles is going to have its Little Tokyo again. It was reported that already there were 21 eating places open or being prepared for business. Some were doing landslide business while others were barely making ends meet. This knocked the idea that I had about anyone being able to make money when he opens an eating place these days. There must be a good cook or some attraction to bring in the customers. It was good to see white, colored and Japanese eating at one place. Of course this did not apply to the cafes or restaurants serving strictly Japanese food....The old Miyako Hotel on the corner of East First and South San Pedro is going to be back in Japanese hands from November 1. I stopped at this place which was still under Negro management. I nearly had to sleep in the park the second night. I had not checked out so I thought my room would be reserved for me. Imagine my surprise and consternation when the room clerk told me at 10:30 p.m. that I had been checked out since I had not paid my next day's rent. I was lucky to have a room without a bath because I noticed that there was no vacancy after that until my departure.

"The old Shokin building is known as the Vimcar building. It had been closed during the duration of the war and has been opened only recently. The trouble with this place is that the rent is high, \$75 a room. However, doctors and dentists are taking up the space because the building is centrally located. JACL's office is located here. We are getting a special rate for four months after which we shall have to decide whether to continue the office in Los Angeles or close up. Everything depends upon the service we can render, the need for such an office, and the finances of national headquarters."

In that same JACL Reporter, Kido encouraged sensitivity towards African Americans.

"The Negro-Japanese relationship in Los Angeles and elsewhere must be guarded carefully. Unfortunately, Japanese,

Negroes and Mexicans are placed in the same district because of residential restrictions. For this reason, there is bound to be some resentment against the returning Japanese property owners by those who are displaced. In Los Angeles, it is reported that a Japanese purchased a hotel's lease and served notice on all the Negro tenants. Friends intervened and advised that the change be made gradually instead of abruptly. Even if there is a right to take action, it is important that tact be applied.

"The Negroes on the whole are sympathetic towards the Japanese. They understand that the district they are occupying belonged to the evacuees. Such being the case, they are saying that the returnees are entitled to the place. Most likely, the former Japanese districts will be shared by the Japanese and the Negroes because many Negroes have either purchased property or made investments."

The United States government's report on Japanese Americans stated: "The reemergence of Japanese communities and the economic adjustment in cities can be seen in Los Angeles. The former Japanese business district was taken over by wartime Negro in-migrants. Little Tokyo became Bronzeville. The central part of it is rapidly becoming Little Tokyo again. Resettlers themselves have been astonished by the speed of transformation. An Issei (first generation) said in April 1946:

"When I came back in January last year, it was solid Negroes around here. I wondered if this would ever be Japanese town again. Nothing much happened for quite awhile. Even during the summer, there were just a few places opened by Japanese. I figured it would be at least three or four years before we could take over. Then during the late summer and fall, they really started to come back. Soon there were more Japanese than Negroes, and Japanese businesses all up and down the streets. I was surprised" ("Impounded People: Japanese Americans in the Relocation Centers," published by the United States Department of the Interior, War Relocation Authority's Final Report #3).

While Japanese Americans were busy re-establishing their lives, African Americans faced a new problem. With demand for war industry machinery slowing down, African American war workers found themselves being laid off. As unemployment soared, so did crime.

The Chicago Defender published a Sept. 22, 1945 article where Executive Secretary of the Chicago Urban League A.L. Foster talked about his visit to Pilgrim House in Bronzeville/Little Tokyo.

Foster is quoted as saying "Los Angeles is experiencing its worst crime wave in history....I have spent much time in 'Little Tokyo,' now more popularly known as 'Bronzeville' and the business people of that district are greatly worried about crime and vice conditions."

In 1947, when the Japanese Business Men's Association hired two Japanese American veterans to patrol Bronzeville/Little Tokyo after dark, racial tension between African Americans and Japanese Americans boiled over, prompting a meeting.

Â

The March 1947 meeting was covered by African American newspapers, including the Chicago Defender, and the mainstream media. Raymond Booth, executive director of the Council for Civic Unity, shared at the meeting that crime had increased due to the dwindling jobs in the post-war era. Los Angeles Police Department Assistant Police Chief Joseph Reed pointed out that Japanese Americans were, in fact, being robbed at an alarming rate but added that most of the perpetrators were from outside the district. He assured attendees that five plainclothes detectives were added to the area after he was informed of the situation.

Los Angeles Tribune columnist Yamamoto may have aptly characterized the postwar African American/Japanese American relationship in her Sept. 14, 1946 column titled, "Small talk...":

"Miss D. has been rather insistent of late that I do a piece about Negro-Japanese relationships. She says they stink. Not the Negroes or Japanese especially, but the relationships."