

Scott Myers-Lipton, 2021
“Japanese American Internment and the Men’s Gymnasium”



Historical Background:

Two months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which ordered the Secretary of War to create military areas within the United States where “any or all persons may be excluded.” When the posters went up, it was clear who this order was directed at, with large print stating “INSTRURCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY”. Executive Order 9066 led to the incarceration in prison camps of 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of which were U.S. citizens.¹

Executive Order 9066 was part of a century-old government policy at the city, state, and federal levels that discriminated against Asian Americans. For example, in 1860, San Francisco enacted a law to deny Chinese students’ admittance into K-12 schools, and in 1870, the city denied jobs to Chinese on public projects. At the state level, discrimination was written into California law in 1851, with the enactment of the Foreign Minter’s tax, which charged a tax on Chinese and Mexicans to discourage them from mining. Moreover, the new California Constitution of 1879 stated that, “No Chinese shall be employed by any State, county, municipal or other public work” and that “No corporation now existing or hereafter formed under the laws of this State, shall under the adoption of this constitution, employ directly or indirectly, in any capacity, any Chinese or Mongolian.” The federal government wrote discrimination into the law with the passage of the 1870 Naturalization Act, which denied citizenship rights to the Chinese, and once again in 1882, with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited all immigration of Chinese skilled and unskilled workers.²

As the federal government passed these racist policies against Chinese residents and potential immigrants, U.S. businesses, which still needed cheap labor, turned to other Asian countries for workers, including Japan and the Philippines. However, many Whites had anger about Asians working in the United States, which led to the federal government enacting the Immigration Act

of 1924, which banned all immigration from any Asian nation. When World War 2 broke out, this anti-Asian sentiment, which had been part of the American fabric of life for 100 years, was directed towards people of Japanese ancestry, regardless of whether they were U.S. citizens.

The Events:

Men's Gym being used as a check-in point for Japanese Americans, 1942 via [SJSU Special Collections](#)



On Saturday, May 23, 1942, Civilian Exclusion Order No. 96 was issued by Lt. General L.J. DeWitt, US Army, to all “All Persons of Japanese Ancestry” living in Santa Clara County. A responsible adult, preferably the head of the household, was told to report to the “Men’s Gymnasium, San Jose State College, 4th and San Carlos Streets” on May 24 and 25, where they were given more information about the “evacuation” (i.e., forced removal), which was to be completed by the following Saturday, May 30. Over the next several days, approximately 6,000 people, mostly American citizens, reported to the Men’s Gymnasium, and were given more detailed information about the removal. They were told to bring only what they could carry, which resulted in the loss of almost everything they owned. The Men’s Gymnasium, which was built in the early 1930s for sport, now turned into the beginning point for the incarceration of Japanese Americans living in Santa Clara County. Upon leaving San José, people were sent to Pomona or the Santa Anita racetrack in Los Angeles where they lived in horse stalls, and then on to the prison camps in Tule Lake, California, Poston, Arizona, and Heart Mountain, Wyoming, where they would be imprisoned for the next three years. At the end of World War 2, they were released into a hostile and racist society.³

Today, the Men’s Gymnasium has been renamed Yoshihiro Uchida Hall. Yosh Uchida, who began his education at San José State College in 1940 (the name had been changed in 1935), was the son of an immigrant farm worker, and was a student when World War 2 began. While Uchida joined the U.S. Army--and served in a segregated unit--Uchida’s family members were processed at the Men’s Gymnasium and imprisoned at Poston and Tule Lake internment camps. After the war, Uchida re-enrolled at San José State and completed his degree in Biology in 1947. Yosh went on to become the Judo coach, leading the Spartans to 45 National Championships in his 60 plus years as coach. He also served as the Judo coach for the 1964 U.S. Olympic Team.⁴

In 2013, a group of students created Students for Public Art as Social Justice, with the goal of creating a free-standing memorial to recognize that Uchida Hall served as the starting point for the imprisoning of Japanese Americans in Santa Clara County during World War 2. The students worked closely with Jimi Yamaichi, one of the founders of the Japanese American Museum and who was processed at the Men's Gymnasium. In addition, the students worked with Dr. Wendy Ng, whose dissertation focused on the internment. Students for Public Art as Social Justice put forward a proposal to build a free-standing memorial, including drawings of the design of it.

Here are some of the drawings for the statue:



The proposal for the statue made its way to an Administrative committee, but no action was taken on the student proposal. Eventually, the students graduated, and the memorial was not built. However, a group of students have formed in the fall of 2021 under the banner of Justice for Japanese, and they have revived this vision of the University constructing an art installation to show SJSU's role in the internment of Japanese Americans.



Resources:

- Civilian Exclusion Order No. 96 issued by Lt. General L.J. DeWitt, <http://imgzoom.cdlib.org/Fullscreen.ics?ark=ark:/13030/kt1j49p9dz/z1&&brand=oac4>
- Japanese American Museum in San José, <https://sanjose.org/listings/japanese-american-museum-san-jose>, (accessed August 29, 2021).
- Photos: Japanese American internment at SJSU Special Collection Library, <https://libguides.sjsu.edu/spartan-quest/uchida-hall> (accessed September 3, 2021).
- Jimi Yamaichi, interview on KCBX, <https://www.kcbx.org/post/94-year-old-jimi-yamaichi-recalls-san-jose-s-japantown-wwii-internment#stream/0> (accessed August 29, 2021).
- “Return of the Valley: Japanese American Experience After the WWII”, Dir. Scott Gracheff, KTEH Public Television, 2009. www.returntothevalley.org (accessed 2/4/18)

FOOTNOTES:

¹ Wartime Defense Command and Fourth Army Wartime Civil Control Administration, “Exclusion Order for San Jose Japanese Internment, 1942,” *Online Archive of California*, <http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt3p30207v/?brand=oac4> (accessed September 10, 2017).

² California Assembly, “*Constitution of the United States, Declaration of Rights, Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation; Constitution of the State of California, as last amended November 6, 1962; Act for the Admission of California into the Union; Constitutional history of California*” (Sacramento, California Legislature, Assembly, 1963).

³ Jill Rae Seib, *Spartan Daily*, May 15, 2006 “Uchida Hall was Once Transfer Point for Japanese American Internees” (PDF); Wartime Defense Command and Fourth Army Wartime Civil Control Administration, “Exclusion Order for San Jose Japanese Internment, 1942”.

⁴ Pat Harris, “Yoshihiro Uchida Hall Rededication Nov. 7,” *SJSU Blog*, October, 28, 2014, <http://blogs.sjsu.edu/newsroom/2014/yoshihiro-uchida-hall-to-be-rededicated> (accessed September 12, 2017); William Rhoden, “For 66 Years, a Force for Judo in the United States”, *NY Times*, April 1, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/sports/san-jose-coach-yoshihiro-uchida-a-force-for-judo.html (accessed September 12, 2017).