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Clark/Guardian of the Sea

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When the City of Honolulu docked in Honolulu Harbor on February 8, 1885, the ship was carrying 944 Japanese men, women, and children. They were the first government contract laborers from Japan, the beginning of a wave of immigrants that between 1885 and 1924 brought tens of thousands of Japanese to Hawai‘i, most of them to work on the sugar plantations. Their story is told in many books, and one of the best is A Pictorial History of the Japanese in Hawai‘i 1885–1924. Edited by Franklin Odo and Kazuko Sinoto and published by the Bishop Museum Press in 1985, the book commemorates the “centennial of the first arrival of government contracted Japanese laborers in Hawai‘i.” Most of the information that follows is from this volume.

When early Polynesians discovered Hawai‘i in their voyaging canoes, they had sugarcane on board with them as a food plant, but large-scale, commercial sugarcane plantations were not established in Hawai‘i until hundreds of years later. The first of these was started in 1835 in Kōloa, Kaua‘i, by three Americans, and by 1890, seventy-two plantations were operating in Hawai‘i, producing raw sugar for transport to refineries in California.

Sugarcane cultivation in its early days was extremely labor intensive, generating an insatiable demand for manual laborers. Hawaiians were the first plantation workers, but their numbers could not meet the demand. They were followed by Chinese immigrants in 1852, the Japanese Gannenmono in 1868 (a small group of 148 contract laborers), Portuguese in 1878, Germans and Scandinavians in 1881, Japanese government contract laborers in 1885, and Spanish in 1899. Other groups that followed were Okinawans and Puerto Ricans in 1900, Koreans in 1903, and Filipinos in 1906.

Villagers in Japan were recruited through formal government announcements, word of mouth, newspaper accounts, and, after 1900, a number of influential “guidebooks” to Hawai‘i. Interested individuals applied through
local offices and obtained exit permits from prefectural governments. After receiving passports from the Foreign Ministry, they traveled at their own expense to Yokohama, where individual contracts were signed with a representative of the Hawaiian government. After a rigorous medical inspection and a boat trip of ten to fourteen days, the prospective laborers were subject to another medical examination in Hawai‘i, quarantined, and then they signed contracts with individual plantations. By 1924 the Japanese population in Hawai‘i included immigrants from many prefectures, including Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, Kumamoto, Okinawa, Fukuoka, Niigata, Wakayama, Miyagi, Okayama, Yamanashi, Ehime, Shizuoka, Tokyo, Chiba, Fukui, Kagoshima, and Kochi.

The plantations in Hawai‘i were constantly looking for new technology to reduce their reliance on human labor. When the Japanese arrived in the late 1800s, railroads were introduced to transport laborers to the fields and cane to the mills, along with steam plows, which helped to cultivate the land for planting. But cutting the seed cane, planting, irrigating, fertilizing, weeding, cutting, and loading the harvested cane into wagons, railroad cars, or flumes all remained backbreaking manual labor. The first male contract laborers in 1885 received $9 per month and the equivalent of $6 in food, for a total of $15, while women received $6 per month and $4 for food, for a total of $10. In addition to the work in the fields, the mills required a wide range of skills: attending to machines used in washing and crushing the stalks to extract the juice; boiling and clarifying the juice; condensing and crystallizing the sugar; and finally, bagging and transporting the product for shipment to refineries in California. Support services involved carpenters, electricians, ironworkers, mechanics, and other skilled workers, and Japanese workers soon filled many of these positions.

Laborers received free housing, medical care, and cooking fuel as part of their contracts from the plantations. By the turn of the century, many plantations built clusters of buildings called camps, with perhaps five or six longhouses measuring approximately 18 by 30 feet and divided into a dozen rooms. In one popular configuration, four of the rooms went to couples, while the other eight were assigned to single men. The couples lived in quarters measuring 6 by 6 feet, and the single men occupied rooms half as wide, with barely enough space in which to sleep. The quality of housing improved dramatically after the 1909 and 1920 strikes, and in the twentieth century kerosene replaced wood as cooking fuel, making life somewhat more bearable. Japanese women prepared all meals for the families and, in
some cases, also cooked for a few bachelors to earn additional income. The variety of ingredients was extremely limited and the Japanese immigrants generally faced simple, repetitious diets. In spite of the hardships, families concentrated on making the best of life in the plantation camps by moving on to better jobs and by establishing social and cultural practices that improved the quality of their lives.

The forty-year period between 1885 and 1924 set the stage for race relations and ethnic cultural activities for society in Hawai‘i. The influence of the Japanese, arriving in large numbers during such a dynamic period in Hawai‘i’s history, proved to be a vital part of today’s unique cultural mix.