

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: Civil rights, diversity in Coachella

Tracy Conrad Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
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The City of Coachella has graciously shared a new book about the town on their website in both English and Spanish. Coachella has worldwide name recognition now, since the advent of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival (which is where the festival name "Coachella" is derived. However, the festival takes place in the nearby city of Indio). But this book recounts a previously unknown history.

It is a story of immigrants and agriculture.

The website explains, "Several books have been written about the history of the Coachella Valley, most of which focus on the efforts of white settlers to develop the valley's agriculture and tourism industries. But while some scholars have written extensively about the history of the Cahuilla Indians and ancient Lake Cahuilla,..." relatively little has been documented about the immigrants themselves.

Written by Jeff Crider, a former Desert Sun and Press-Enterprise reporter who did extensive research in order to produce the book, there are stories from the children and grandchildren of several of the eastern valley's Mexican American, Japanese American and African American pioneers.

Crider consulted archives including those of The Desert Sun and Los Angeles Times, but also found fascinating older papers, like the Coachella Valley Submarine and The Date Palm, no longer in operation.

Crider traces the history of immigrants who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, those who were employed in the agriculture industry working on date farms and grape vineyards, those working in restaurants and hotels, and small farmers and ranchers who developed their own businesses.

He recounts the effects of the Mexican Revolution causing many to flee the violence in Mexico only to find segregation and discrimination here. He chronicles the legal case, a precursor to the Brown v. Board of Education at the Supreme Court eight years later, in which the U.S. District Court in 1946 ended segregation in California when it ruled that segregating Mexican American students violated the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.

A dark topic explored in the book is the so-called "Mexican Repatriation" where between 1927 and 1934 an estimated 400,000 to 1,000,000 workers were deported to Mexico during the Great Depression due to concerns that they were taking jobs from Anglo workers (despite such treatment, many young men from immigrant families joined the U.S. military and served with distinction in WWII).



The Kitagawa family in a date grove.

COURTESY OF THE KITAGAWA FAMILY



An early photo, taken in 1903, of what would become the city of Coachella.

COURTESY THE COACHELLA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The book describes how Coachella not only attracted Mexican immigrants, but people from many other far-flung countries, including Japan, Portugal, Turkey, and Armenia. It also reports on the exodus of African Americans from the southern United States to the valley to escape persecution and segregation.

Crider didn't expect to write so much about civil rights, but as the story revealed itself, he found it inescapable. He details an incredible story of the remarkably diverse community that resulted.

The book truly contributes to scholarship by recounting untold histories of immigrants of such varied backgrounds. A fascinating case in point are the chapters devoted to the Japanese families of Coachella.

Exactly one day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, sixty-four Japanese residents of Coachella gathered at Coachella Presbyterian Church and publicly pledged their allegiance to the United States and to the U.S. Constitution, according to a December 12, 1941 article in the Coachella Valley Submarine.

But their pledge and their rights were summarily ignored. Following Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order

9066 to imprison all Japanese, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors followed suit by unanimously passing its own resolution "requesting the military authorities to exclude all enemy aliens from Riverside county and also to remove all Japanese, irrespective of citizenship, from the confines of the county," according to a February 27, 1942 report in *The Submarine*, which also noted that a petition was being circulated in the Coachella Valley "asking that all Japanese citizens as well as non-citizens be removed from the entire West Coast."

The relocation of eastern Coachella valley students of Japanese descent is documented in the commemorative yearbook, "Coachella Valley Union High School: The First 50 Years 1910-1960."

Crider quotes, "One of the saddest days in the history of Coachella Valley Union High School had to have been May 19, 1942. On that day, all Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the Coachella Valley, citizens and non-citizens alike, were put on buses, with one suitcase or a small box apiece, and taken to a hurriedly constructed internment camp called Poston, located in the desolate mesquite desert outside of Parker, Arizona."

"Eleventh grade students at Coachella Valley Union High School threw a farewell party for their Japanese friends before they were taken away on May 14, 1942. Charles Shibata, an Indio native of Japanese descent, was dumbfounded by the government's orders. 'It never occurred to me that I was not an American,'" Shibata told *The Desert Sun* in an August 15, 1995 interview when he was 72 years old. "I was born here, raised here, went to schools here, had never been to Japan. I was just like any boy who had been born here."

On December 7, 1941, Shibata was attending Los Angeles City College. After the bombing, he immediately returned home to his family's farm and was sent to Poston internment camp along with roughly thirty other families from the Coachella Valley.

Randall Henderson, the publisher of *Desert Magazine* and denizen of Palm Desert, traveled to Poston during WWII for an article. He was astonished by efficiency and industry of the little city he found, crediting the tremendous ingenuity, resilience and tolerance of the Japanese people interned there.

The specifics of their lives are captured in Crider's equally astonishing book. Entitled "A History of Coachella and its People," it is as erudite as it is interesting, and can be downloaded at <https://www.coachella.org/about-us/history/history-book>.

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