ISSET WOMEN’S LEGACY

Life in America was full of unknowns for an Issei (Japanese immigrant) departing Japan in the early 1900s. She may have come to America as a laborer or accompanying her husband. More likely, she came as a picture bride, through an arranged marriage based on an exchange of photographs and letters. A picture bride would meet her husband for the first time after clearing the Immigration station at Angel Island.

Although screened by the Japanese government for financial means to support a family, a prospective husband often sent letters and photographs convinced to make him seem younger, more attractive or wealthier than he actually was. No matter her situation, an Issei woman would face a lifetime of challenges in America: adapting to a new culture, working to raise her family and building a new community.

A Dream Interrupted

Because of the Internment, the Issei women entrusted their building to the San Francisco YMCA. In 1942, it was leased to the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), one of the handful of organizations that had actively opposed the Internment.

In addition to being the AFSC Northern California branch office, “Friend’s House” was the Internment office for what later became the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, which helped place interned students at colleges outside of the exclusion zone. In 1945, the AFSC welcomed and supported the returning Japanese Americans by helping them find jobs and housing through its Reintegration Office and providing temporary shelter at Friends House.

Few of the women who founded and led the Japanese YMCA returned to San Francisco after the War. Because of policies enacted by the YMCA during the war, the Japanese YMCA was prevented from reestablishing itself as an independent entity. Although for many years a dedicated core of Issei women continued their activities through a joint program with the Buckman YMCA, the original Japanese YMCA and the knowledge of its ownership of the 1830 Sutter building, faded away.

A Dream Fulfilled

The legacy of the Issei women was nearly extinguished in 1946. The San Francisco YMCA decided to put the building on the market and liquidate its remaining properties, including the Nihonmachi Little Friends bilingual, multicultural preschool which had been the sole Japanese American community tenant in the building since 1985 and the haven for students from schools. Out of school program for African American girls, a tenant for over 30 years. News of the YMCA’s action stirred memories of the lost women’s fundraising drive for the building and their efforts to ensure that it would always serve the Japanese American community. Entering negotiations with the YMCA, Japanese American researchers discovered that the YMCA’s own historical minutes documented their adoption of the trust created by the Issei women. Nonetheless, the YMCA denied the trust’s existence and proceeded with its plan to sell the building.

The community called to halt the evictions and to reclaim this priceless piece of its history. The Soko Balai, the Japanese Christian church network whose members originally formed the Japanese YMCA, sued to enjoin the trust. In 2002, the lawsuit settled out of court on terms favorable to the Japanese American community. As the Soko Balai’s request, Nihonmachi Little Friends became the building’s new owner and steward, to preserve the 1830 Sutter building and to perpetuate and honor the Issei women’s legacy as visionary community builders.