

## **The Seizo Oka Collection**

### **Japanese American History Archives**

Project of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center  
of Northern California

The Seizo Oka Collection-Japanese American History Archives is one of the most extensive community-owned collections of rare Issei primary documents that survived the tragic loss of property due to EO 9066. The Oka collection includes personal diaries, newspapers, journals, manuscripts, memoirs, one-of-a-kind books, and photographs.

*"The Japanese American History Archives is an incredible treasure trove of primary sourcebooks, personal papers, and original art documenting the Japanese American experience in California."* Gary Kurutz, Curator of Special Collections of the California State Library

The archives are approximately 1000 linear feet consisting of over 10,000 historical items and over 4000 photos dating back to 1879. The collection contains primary source materials and very rare and valuable documents to the pre-post war Japanese American community. The majority of the collection is focused on Issei's history and materials on the early Japanese community in the mid-1800s – 1950. Also included in the collection are original crafts, paintings, and artifacts made by Issei in the concentration camps. Other notable items include original paintings by Gertrude Farquharson Boyle Kanno, Chiura Obata, Hisako Hibi, and the desk used by Dean Acheson at the Japanese Peace Conference 1951.

#### **Background**

Mr. Oka was a Kibei Nisei born in San Francisco who moved to Japan at age 12. He studied English and law at Tokyo University and, after graduation, became a banker. Upon returning back to the US in 1948, he taught Japanese and English languages until he joined the Bank of Tokyo in 1957. He began collecting historical documents on the Issei generation as far back as 1952, a year after the signing of the Peace Treaty between the United States and Japan following World War II. Acquiring material was not an easy task, given that most Issei had thrown away much of their personal documents and archives following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Academics and universities would not start collecting these historical documents for at least another decade. Initially formed in 1977 as the Japanese American History Room (History Room), it was a project of California 1st Bank, formally Bank of Tokyo, where Oka worked as Vice President. Under the bank's sponsorship and Oka's direction, the History Room started to amass an extensive collection of primary source material on the Issei generation.

In 1986, California 1st Bank assigned the ownership of the entire history room collection to the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC). Oka renamed the History Room, The Japanese American History Archives (JAHA) and continued to act as the archives' Executive Director and curator. Under his leadership, the collection continued

to grow in both material and prestige. The archives became recognized as a comprehensive research facility for scholars, students, businesses, government agencies, and universities both in the United States and Japan. JAHA's primary source material on the Issei became a resource for other higher education institutions, including U.C. Berkeley, UCLA, and Stanford University. Over the years, the archival collection became a resource for books, research material, educational textbooks, documentaries, and even feature films.

In 2004, Seizo Oka passed away, and Japantown lost its most knowledgeable and recognized community historian. He spent half a century chronicling, archiving, preserving, and sharing his knowledge about the Japanese American community and the Issei generation. JAHA is his legacy and the collection of historical archives a treasure for our community.

Since 2018, JCCCNC entered into a partnership with the Hoover Institution Library & Archives at Stanford University. Kay Ueda, Curator of the Japanese Diaspora Collection, and Maaya Abe, Library Specialist of the Hoover Library, have been assisting in digitizing primary documents and newspapers, which will be made available on the Hoji Shinbun Digital Collection (HSDC).

They recently completed editing the English translation of "Zaiben Nihonjin-shi, History of Japanese in America" (1940). Seizo Oka spent seven years translating the book that documents the Japanese in America from 1841 to 1940. The book contains the most comprehensive documentation of the creation and development of the Japanese community in the United States in the first voice of the Issei as history was happening.

In 2019, the Henri and Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation made a grant to address preservation issues, mold remediation, cataloging, and renovation of the archival room and adjacent exhibit hall. The project is expected to be completed in fall 2021.