

Asian American-Pacific Islander History Month

Many Americans are surprised to learn the rich history of Asian Americans. Asian Americans have participated in American history for its early beginnings and conflicts. Though these were denied citizenship much the same as African-Americans, they were loyal to the United States. Among the first immigrants to the United States from Japan and China, there were harsh stories of exploitation. These immigrants suffered from discrimination and mistreatment not unlike African-Americans who were held as slaves. Asians were often relegated to live in slum areas and the only jobs they often could get were as indentured servants in mines and other hard labor jobs. The treatment was little better than slavery.

Joseph Pierce

Pierce was an ethnic Chinese soldier from Connecticut during Civil War. He was one of the few Asians to fight on either side of the conflict. His fellow soldiers remembered him as a brave soldier in memoirs.

Yukio Okutsu of the 442nd Combat Regimental Team

The 100th Battalion (442nd Combat Regimental Team) won a total of eight Distinguished Service Crosses, 44 Silver Stars, 31 Bronze Stars and three Legion of Merit medals. Despite having family members interned in U.S. internment camps, these American soldiers fought bravely and with great distinction. The soldiers of the 100th Battalion were among the Nisei (children of immigrant Japanese) who fought in WWII. They also helped liberate Holocaust survivors.

Yukio Okutsu was awarded the Medal of Honor 55 years after single-handedly wiping out three German machine-gun positions in the battle for an Italian hill during World War II. In April 1945, Sergeant Okutsu's platoon in the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team was halted by machine-gun crossfire during the fighting for Mount Belvedere.

Okutsu crawled to within 30 yards of one enemy emplacement and killed its three gunners by hurling a pair of hand grenades. Dashing forward, he threw another grenade, wounding two Germans and capturing two others. Though stunned by being hit by enemy fire, he charged several enemy riflemen with his submachine gun. Then he rushed the remaining machine-gun position and captured its crew of four. His actions enabled his platoon to continue its assault. He received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's second-highest award for bravery. More than fifty years would pass before he ultimately received the nation's highest award for his bravery. In 2000, President Clinton bestowed the Medal of Honor on Okutsu and 21 other ethnic Asian soldiers.

Philip Chu, Architect

Philip Chu was born in Shanghai, China in 1919. Surviving the Japanese occupation, he immigrated to the United States during World War II. He attended Oberlin College in Ohio and the University of Michigan. Chu, being one of the few Asian architects in the nation at the time, joined the architectural firm of O'Connor & Kilham in the 1950's. Later he became the managing partner of the NYC architectural firm Kilham, Beder & Chu. He contributed to more than 70 buildings, including dormitories at West Point. He was famed as an architect of libraries including those at Amherst, Barnard and Bryn Mawr Colleges and at Princeton University. His designs were extraordinary as they took libraries beyond being warehouses for books; to being both study area and repositories of information.

James Leong

James Leong was one of the first nationally acclaimed Asian artists in the nation. Leong achieved remarkable success at a young age, Leong completed a historical mural for his Master of Fine Arts degree at age 21 when he was selected by the San Francisco housing commission's committee to paint what would become his famous mural for a public housing project. He drew international attention as he worked; over the eight months of his work, Leong sensed he was being followed. He was able to confront them and found that one was from the FBI, one was from the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang and the third was from the Chinese Communist Party. Leong would later tell reports that he thought the reason was there was concern that the painting was going to be damaging to their particular party. He assured them that the mural contained no hidden images or subtle messages, and invited them to watch him paint. They declined, and while the surveillance continued, it was less covert. His murals are featured in public building across the nation.

Philip Tong Chu

Phillip Tong Chu was born in Honolulu in 1918. He received his B.S. degree from the University of Hawaii in 1940, and his M.D. degree from Pennsylvania Medical School of St. John's University in Shanghai, China, in 1944. He served his internship at St. Luke's Hospital in Shanghai 1943-1944. As part of the WWII reconstruction from 1945-1947, Dr. Chu was Regional Medical Officer for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, China Division.

He returned to the United States in 1947 and began teaching at Jefferson Medical College and Hospital in Philadelphia, as one of the first few ethnic Asians to do so. Afterwards, he became interested in surgery and served a one-year surgical residency at Doctor's Hospital, Washington, D.C., in 1952. Afterwards, he was surgeon and Medical-Officer-in-Charge of the U.S. Public Health Service Indian Hospital at Sacaton, Arizona and later served in Detroit. He spent the remainder of his life in Hawaii, working as a doctor and administrator. He was deeply religious and actively involved in the advancement of medical education in Taiwan and elsewhere in the Far East. He died in 1970 after having been involved in relief work as well as educational development including work on the Board of Directors of the fledging community college of Kapiolani.

Anna Wong

Anna Wong (nee Wong Liu Tsong) was one of the first Asian movie stars. She became an actress during a time in which Asian roles were often cast to Caucasians in heavy makeup. Though she got her first big break into acting in the United States, she had to go to Europe to sustain her career. She briefly worked in China, tragically she was not welcomed in her parents' ancestral village where she was greeted by protesters shouting "Down with Huang Liu Tsong -- the stooge that disgraces China. Don't let her go ashore." Wong wrote the preface to one of the first Chinese cookbooks printed in the U.S. in 1942. The proceeds from it were dedicated to the WWII relief organization, United China Relief.

She became the first Asian American and one of the few women to star in her own television series *The Gallery of Madam Liu-Tsong*. The show didn't last long. Her career never took off again. She died an early death in 1961. (based on www.imdb.com)

Gary Karose "Peace or Else"

Gary Kurose was born Dec. 21, 1952. As a pre-teen, he participated in civil-rights demonstrations with his family. He became a Black Panther as a teenager (he was one of just a few Asian American Black Panthers). With the Black Panthers, Kurose worked on the breakfast program and marched in rallies. He skipped classes to attend demonstrations for Indian fishing rights. After graduating from high school, he attended the University of Washington. Kurose then moved to Japan for a few years. There, he studied martial arts at Tenri University and became fluent in Japanese. He later hosted his own Japanese language jazz radio show.

Kurose never married nor had any kids. However, he dedicated his life to children. Kurose became an ordained priest; but rather than preaching at kids, Kurose would buy them lunch and talk to them one-on-one. He found jobs and housing for young men trying to shake gang affiliations. He found scholarships others.

Kurose received the 1994 (Seattle) Mayor's Violence Prevention Inspirational Award, was named to the Northwest Asian Weekly's list of "Top 10 Contributors to the Asian Community" in 1994, was nominated for the 1995 Black Child Development Award for his work with African American youths and received the Pacific Islanders Gratitude Award in 1996. In 1996, he also received the Nordstrom Cultural Diversity Award for his work with young people. Kurose worked for the last 10 years at the Center for Career Alternatives, where he developed an anti-violence program for young people and counseled at-risk youths. He died in 2003 of cancer. (based on article by Carol Vu)

A Friend to Asian Americans

Julius A. Goldwater

Rev. Julius A. Goldwater, a descendant of German Jewish immigrants became an ordained Buddhist priest in the 1930s and went on to teach Buddhism for almost 70 years. Goldwater is best known for taking a stand against bigotry after Franklin Roosevelt authorized the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans on the West Coast. Goldwater assumed responsibility for all temples in the district and his temple became a warehouse for the belongings of interned Japanese. Goldwater traveled to internment camps to take food, Buddhist study materials and news of the outside world to internees of campus in California, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado and Arkansas. He watched over internees' homes, preventing at least one illegal sale of property. When internees were released at the end of the war, Goldwater turned his temple into a hostel where internees could find temporary housing. Goldwater took a stand to help the internees out of religious duty but also out of memories of the discrimination of German Americans during World War I. He died in 2001.