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Other Voices: Glimpses of African American, Chinese American, and Japanese American Students at Berkeley, From the 1920s to the mid-1950s

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OTHER VOICES

GLIMPSSES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN, CHINESE AMERICAN, AND JAPANESE AMERICAN STUDENTS AT BERKELEY, FROM THE 1920s TO THE MID-1950s

IDA LOUISE JACKSON'S POIGNANT and elegantly dignified reflections upon her years on the Berkeley campus serve to remind us that some individuals have endured a great deal because of extreme prejudice and discrimination. Nonetheless, many have accomplished much. Fortunately, the Berkeley campus now is a very different place than it was in the early 1920s when the young African American woman sat "day after day beside students who acted as if my seat were unoccupied."¹

The stories of African American, Chinese American, Japanese American, and other students whose voices once were seldom heard outside their own groups need to be told. It is hoped that this brief—and all too limited—account of participation in extracurricular activities by a few of the women who matriculated at the University of California from the 1920s to the mid-1950s may be a small step in correcting this omission.

The enforced isolation that drew together the eight women and nine men of whom Ida Jackson spoke had led to the founding of the Braithwaite Club. In 1921 she and friends also organized a local chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha (the nation's first black sorority, founded at Howard University in 1908) using Jackson's home on Fifty-eighth Street as their sorority house. Campus publications at the time paid virtually no attention to the activities of "minority" students, and often were hostile. To the great disappointment of the Rho chapter, the *Blue and Gold* refused to include the club photograph that AKA members had paid for!²



Ida Jackson, 1935.
Regional Oral History Office.



Tea following Fencing Atelier, 1950s. *Hearst Gymnasium Historical Collection.*

In 1944, when Alpha Kappa Alpha's western regional conference was held at UC Berkeley, youth, health, and education in the postwar world were the topics discussed by delegates from four states.³ The following year the *Daily Californian* announced that the Berkeley chapter of Delta Sigma Theta (founded at Howard University in 1912; Berkeley chapter organized around 1922) was now recognized by the ASUC Executive Committee.⁴ Although campus publications gave exceed-

ingly little attention to such events, some limited information about student activities and affiliations may be extracted from the pages of the *Blue and Gold*,⁵ especially the section dealing with graduating seniors.

Those few African American women whose pictures appeared among the graduating class were likely to indicate an affiliation with Alpha Kappa Alpha or with Delta Sigma Theta. AKA members Ester Marian Reed (economics) and Ethel Louise Morgan (mathematics), both of whom graduated in 1937, were among several who indicated an association with the YWCA or International House. Morgan also was a member of Berkeley's Iota chapter of Phrateres (a national women's social organization founded at UCLA in 1924). A few participated in activities offered by the Women's Athletic Association (WAA) or had been a member of one of the university's then numerous student professional societies. Fannie Ernestine Parks '38 was a member of Delta Sigma Theta, the YWCA, and Prytanean (the university's junior and senior honorary society). Jeanne Marie Hill '40 listed the Home Economics Club, YWCA, International House, and Delta Sigma Theta among her affiliations. Classmate Addie Mae Logan, who graduated with a major in Spanish, was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, YWCA, and an organization called Sages and Dunces. Barbara J. Grischott '50 was a member of Prytanean as well as the YWCA, Orchesis (the modern dance club), and Alpha Kappa Alpha. Fellow AKA member Marguerita Ray '53 was active with Mask and Dagger (dramatics honor society), Thalian Players (honorary directing society), and Hammer and Dimmer.



Ethel Louise Morgan.
1937 *Blue and Gold*.



Hammer and Dimmer. 1953 *Blue and Gold*.

Classmate Geraldine Hellett (social welfare) had affiliations with AKA, the Italian Club, NAACP, the *Daily Californian*, and the *Blue and Gold*. Johnnie Caldwell '54 listed membership in Tower and Flame (lower division honor society), Zeta Phi Beta, and Kappa Phi as well as the YWCA and NAACP.⁶ Speech major Ruth Chapman '55 was a member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority as was psychology major Camille Crews '55, who also had experience on the *Daily Californian*'s managerial committee.

A Chinese Students Club (CSC) had been founded at the University of California in 1913. By 1920, the club had its own house which served as the venue for various social functions. The CSC included female as well as male members, and many women graduating in

the decades of the '20s, '30s, and '40s listed the CSC among their affiliations. Several also were active with the YWCA. Janie M. Lee '24 had been a member of the CSC, the YWCA Cabinet, and president of the International Students Foyer. Ruth Mary Lee '26, a member of the CSC, had played on WAA basketball and field hockey teams. Nancy Lim '35 and Helen Maybell Fong '35 were among several others who listed participation in WAA activities. Fong also had been a participant in Orchesis and the Physical Education Majors Club. Mathematics major Ethel Cora Lum '33 had been associated with the CSC, Alpha Beta Kappa, Pi Mu Epsilon (mathematics honorary society), the YWCA, and the Honor Students' Advisory Board.

As had Ida Jackson and other young African Americans, young Chinese and Japanese women also could experience the humiliation of being denied access to clubs and facilities.⁷ Consequently, their own communities organized a variety of events for their young people.⁸ The *Chinese Digest*, which began publication in 1935, was a major source of information about political, social, and economic events affecting the Chinese community on the West Coast. Information concerning the annual "Big Game" dance and other events that the CSC organized may be found in the *Digest* and its successor the *Chinese News*. In 1936 when Lim P. Lee interviewed Berkeley mathematics professor B.C. Wong, 189 Chinese students were enrolled in twenty-one different majors at Berkeley.⁹ The CSC held social functions at its own premises, and at times the International House. The Chinese Alumni Association held its first annual skiing trip in 1941.¹⁰

Jane Fong '40 had been a member of the CSC, Sigma Kappa Theta (history honorary society), and the Orientation Committee as well as junior class secretary. Classmate Katherine May Woo (bacteriology) participated with the YWCA Student Health Committee, the Public Health Forum, and WAA. May Whang, who also graduated in 1940, was a member of the university chorus. In 1941, Priscilla Chan '42 was elected vice president of the CSC.¹¹ Vivian Lee '50 had been YWCA president, a member of the Women's Executive Committee, and a member of both Prytanean and Mortar Board (senior women's honor society).



Members of Sigma Omicron Pi. 1953 *Blue and Gold*.

Among members of Sigma Omicron Pi in 1953 (the Chinese women's sorority founded at Berkeley in 1930) were Marie Chan and Louise Mah Gee. Doris Yee '54, Gladis Yee '54, and Ying Ken '54 were members of this sorority as well as the YWCA. Child development major Barbara Wong '55, who was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and the Women's "C" Society,



WAA Sports Club Board. 1955 *Blue and Gold*.

also served as a member of the WAA Sports Club Board.

A Japanese Students Club also had been organized in 1913, but it does not appear that women were included. In 1928 a Japanese Women's Students Club was formed and a chapter

house was opened on Hearst Avenue. President of the JWSC in 1940 (which then listed fifty-eight undergraduate members) was Dorothy Takeichi.¹² (The JSC that year listed ninety-one members.) Toshiko Kitagawa '25 was a Senior Adviser, a member of the Household Art Association and the YWCA, and served on Partheneia's costume design committee. Sumile Morishita '27 played basketball and field hockey, two of the several WAA sports in which Kasai Tomoye also engaged (the others were riflery and fencing). A photograph in the May 5, 1931 *Oakland Tribune* featured Tazuko Donato as one of several basketball-playing "coeds" attired in the university's new gymnasium costume.¹³

During the 1930s, a considerable number of graduating Japanese American women cited membership in the JWSC. Yuriko Domoto '35, a member of the JWSC, YWCA, and Prytanean, served on the WAA Council, received the Pennant "C" award, and was elected to membership in the Women's "C" Society. Bertha Akimoto '36, a member of Orchesis, was one of several students who served as hostesses at the tea honoring the visit of noted dancer and choreographer Martha Graham.



WAA fencers, ca. 1929-30. *Hearst Gymnasium Historical Collection*



Women's "C" Society. 1935 *Blue and Gold*.

Tomoye Nozawa '37 participated in YWCA and International House activities, and was a member of Delta Chi Alpha (a household art major society), Pi Theta, and Phrateres. Sadie Nomura '40, who was elected recording secretary of Alpha Alpha (journalism society),¹⁴ served on the *Daily Californian* staff and was a member of Theta Sigma Phi (women's journalism honor society).

Some information regarding Japanese students at the University of California may be found in the *Berkeley Bussei*, a publication of the local Young Buddhist Association (YBA). To welcome newly enrolled students at Armstrong College and the university, a roller skating and dancing party was held in early fall 1939. Several YBA members engaged in activities at the university as well as in those sponsored by their own organization. Physical education major Takako Shinoda '54 was a forward on both a WAA "interclass" and the Berkeley Young Women's Buddhist Association's basketball teams.¹⁵ She was WAA recording secretary, a member of the Women's "C" Society, a member of the Nisei Students' Club, and also served as chair of the 1953 High School Sports Day, which was attended by students from over seventy northern California secondary schools. She also served as stage manager for the *Orchesis* production. Setsuko Saito '54 was a member of the Child Development Club, WAA, and Alpha Delta Chi. History major Helen Hiro-hata '54, who belonged to Alpha Delta Chi as well as the Nisei Students' Club, was

on the ASUC secretariat. Violet Nozaki '54 had been active with *Tower and Flame*, WAA, and Phi Chi Theta. Art major Midori Kono '55 was a member of Delta Epsilon and president of *Orchesis*. Classmate Janice Makimoto '55 was a leading dancer in and choreographer



WAA Council. 1954 *Blue and Gold*.

of several Orchesis productions and president of the Physical Education Majors Club.

In the decades between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s, students such as those noted above most frequently listed as part of their graduation information an affiliation with their own sororities and clubs. According to these self-reports the two campuswide extracurricular organizations that most often provided them with at least some opportunities for interactions with other students were the YWCA and the Women's Athletic Association. By the mid-1950s the United States was on the verge of a major social and political revolution that would bring, however slowly and unevenly, increased opportunities to populations that long had felt the sting of ostracism.

The Berkeley campus now is a very different place, offering to thousands of such students who wish to partake in them a wide range of extracurricular activities. Whereas contemporaries had acted as if Ida Jackson's seat "were unoccupied," today young women from diverse backgrounds study together, laugh together, swim together, and in multiple ways engage each other simply as human beings. —R.J.P.



Orchesis, early 1940s.
Hearst Gymnasium Historical Collection.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Ida L. Jackson" in *There Was Light, Autobiography of a University, Berkeley: 1868-1968*, ed. Irving Stone (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 249-266.
- 2 Ibid. Very occasionally information about UC students appeared in one of the several newspapers of the local African American community. See for example "Local colleges graduate eleven," *San Francisco Spokesman*, May 14, 1932, 3. For more general information see: Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993).
- 3 "Western regional conference," *Daily Californian*, July 28, 1944, 3.
- 4 "ASUC accepts negro society," *Daily Californian*, May 8, 1945, 2.
- 5 Unless otherwise noted the material that follows is drawn from the *Blue and Gold*.
- 6 In several instances contemporary sources do not give exact (or any) information about the nature of the organization. If readers can shed light on any or all of these, such information would be appreciated.
- 7 See: Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 113.
- 8 See for example: Gwendolyn Captain, "Social, Religious, and Leisure Pursuits of Northern California's African American Population: The Discovery of Gold Through World War II." M. A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1995; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
- 9 Lim P. Lee, "Problems of the Chinese students," *Chinese Digest*, October 2, 1936, 10.
- 10 *Chinese News*, February 15, 1941, 1. Public Health graduate Alice Yim '55 cited affiliation with the Ski Club.
- 11 "Chinese students elect officers," *Daily Californian*, April 30, 1941, 3.
- 12 "Japanese women's club elects officers," *Daily Californian*, February 7, 1940, 2. Grace Obata '42 was elected athletic chairman.
- 13 "Coeds wear new gym costumes," *Oakland Tribune*, May 5, 1931.
- 14 "Journalism society elects new officers," *Daily Californian*, April 28, 1939, 1.
- 15 *Berkeley Bussei*, 1951, 42.



1924 *Blue and Gold*.