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Through Our Own Eyes: Making Movies with Japanese American Home Movies

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Americans of Japanese ancestry have been an integral part of the United States for more than a hundred years. Recruited as a source of cheap labor to replace the Chinese after the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1880, they came intending to make a lot of money and return to their homeland. Of course, this was not as easy as they had hoped and, despite the widespread discrimination against non-whites, they ended up staying. Not only did they make America their home, they helped make America. They worked the fields and the factories; they had American-born children; they built stores and churches. Yet while the majority society was routinely reflected in the newsreels of the day, Japanese Americans and other Americans of color, considered literally unsightly, went unrecorded. When they did make it onto the screen in Hollywood films and commercial television, they had sporadic cameos as exotic menacing villains or laughable submissive servants - caricatures that bore no resemblance to who they really were.

However, unbeknownst to the majority society, when the consumer 16mm camera was marketed in 1923, Japanese American gardeners, priests, businessmen and former picture brides began recording their lives on home movies, in essence making their own motion pictures. Originally meant as a personal means of chronicling their lives, they lay abandoned - and deteriorating - in attics, basements, closets for over 60 years. Today they survive as the only authentic motion picture documentation of Japanese Americans in the mid 20th century and provide a never-before-seen look at multi-cultural America in the making.

With a background in anthropology, media and Asian American Studies I started working with home movies in 1989 when photographer and filmmaker Robert A. Nakamura and I were hired to develop the photographic collection of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California. The mission of the museum is to tell the history and culture of Japanese in America from their own perspective. When we discovered the existence of home movies made by Japanese immigrant pioneers called *Issei* (literally meaning “the first generation”) in the 1920s and 1930s, and by their American-born offspring called *Nisei* (second generation) in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, we realized this lowly medium could bring history and culture to life like no other artifact could. The following article summarizes how we made movies from these Japanese American home movies and in the process salvaged this disregarded genus of historical artifact.

Japanese American Home Movies in the 1920s and 1930s

The first home movie collection we found consisted of twenty 400 foot reels of 16mm black and white film taken by an *Issei* businessman in the Pacific Northwest. They were taken from as early as 1924 - just one year after Eastman Kodak had introduced 16mm to the public - to the late 1930s. On this early home footage were remarkable images that we had not even seen in still photos such as Japanese American lumberjacks in overalls floating logs down the Columbia River and Japanese American women playing golf and sliding down the snow in skirts. There was an Independence Day Parade with vintage World War I tanks and uniformed soldiers followed by a typical Fourth of July picnic complete with races and American flags - except that all the participants are Japanese. There were even rare interior scenes of a Japanese American bank with Caucasian workers using upright telephones and Japanese workers calculating figures on an abacus.

Clearly these were not the mundane, seemingly endless dizzy shots of family vacations, birthday parties and kids learning to walk that one usually associates with "home movies." These early home movies were without a doubt visual evidence, documentary footage of cultural and historical significance. Soon thereafter we found many more collections taken by Japanese pioneers. Why did these immigrants take up home movies so readily? My conjecture is that unlike other parts of the world, photography was popularized in Japan by the mid-1800s. So much so that traditional wood-block printers began new careers hand-tinting photographs to adapt to the changing market. After Japanese starting immigrating to the U.S. at the turn of the century, the photograph became critical to the evolution of Japanese American society with the phenomenon of the "picture bride" - the exchange of photographs of men in the U.S. and women in Japan for a cross-Pacific version of the arranged marriage. Formal portrait studios sprang up in the smallest of Japanese American communities, and traveling photographers reached the remotest areas, complete with rentable Western suits to optimize the marriagability of even the poorest worker. As they started having children and building communities, they customarily sent photographs back to relatives in Japan to show what life in America was like. Therefore, already familiar with the photographic image, when the social practice of home movie making became available they embraced this new moving variety naturally and with enthusiasm. Being unrecognized and unvalued as the cultural resource they were, the home movies that were still extant lay forgotten. When we put out the word we were looking for home movies taken by Japanese Americans, we were delighted to find more than we thought existed.

We realized that the trajectories of amateur filmmaking and Japanese American history co-evolved. In 1924, the year after Eastman Kodak introduced consumer models of 16 mm cameras and projectors, the Asian Exclusion Act Japanese halted further

immigration from Japan. Home movie making continued to be widely practiced and Japanese Americans reflect the development of the medium with color film introduced in 1928, 8mm film in 1932 and Super 8 in 1965. Now, after over 130 years in the U.S., Japanese Americans have been here for as many as six and seven generations and have created a distinctly Japanese American culture with its own style and making that is uniquely reflected in home movies and now home videos.

Through Our Own Eyes (1991) and Moving Memories (1992)

The first production Robert Nakamura and I produced with home movies was a three-screen laser disc installation called *Through Our Own Eyes* consisting exclusively of recently discovered 16mm home movies taken by Issei in the 1920s and 1930s. It was produced for the inaugural exhibition of the Japanese American National Museum in 1991. The purpose of *Through Our Own Eyes* was to bring the Japanese immigrants "back to life" and insert their presence into a traditionally static museum exhibit. Utilizing a three-screen mode of presentation maximized the effect of showing the rich variety of Japanese American life within a limited space.

It was important for us to maintain the integrity of the original film footage as much as we could. As the director, in the selection and editing stages, Nakamura tried many variations, including editing the images thematically and editing them chronologically. Soon we found ourselves guided by the home movies themselves, as they presented unique visions of life as the filmmaker lived and filmed it. Instead of editing the production by theme or chronology and thereby combining and merging collections, because each home moviemaker's vision/version of life in their adopted country was so distinct we decided to edit within collections and present them as discrete segments. To introduce each segment, we included a picture of the amateur filmmaker in a still photo or home movie excerpt, his name, and his birth and death dates. Although we eventually found home moviemakers who were women, at the time of production, we only had collections filmed by men.

The three-screen installation had no narration, intending instead to let the visuals speak for themselves and in a non-didactic manner bring the presence of the immigrant spirit into the exhibition space. To underscore the immigrants' points of view, the music track consisted of Japanese and American songs that were widely listened to during the era. Nakamura and I sampled and selected from over three hundred 78-rpm records that were donated or loaned by immigrants or their children - including a lively rendition of the popular American tune "My Blue Heaven" sung in Japanese. During the run of the exhibit, older Japanese American visitors could be heard singing along with the nostalgic songs they grew up with.

Through Our Own Eyes depicted Japanese Americans doing typically "American" things such as playing football as well as typically "Japanese" things such as participating in Japanese dances. What is more revealing and insightful was the integration of these seemingly distinct cultural activities. For example, sequences showed them conducting characteristically American activities in Japanese ways such as celebrating the Fourth of July with Japanese food; as well as celebrating Japanese traditions in new American ways such as adding Shirley Temple dolls to the Japanese dolls displayed on Girls' Day. In one scene two young *Nisei* girls dance around a record player in a living room - one is in a Japanese kimono and the other in a western dress. The father is filmed posing on a couch in the living room reading a newspaper and upon closer look, instead of *The Los Angeles Times*, we see it is a Japanese American paper written in English and Japanese. In another scene, children eat noodles with Japanese *hashi's* (chopsticks) while the parents across the table are filmed eating with fork and knife.

In these ways *Through Our Own Eyes* provided a vantage point from which the whole rather than the margins could be seen. They bore witness to a distinct Japanese American culture as it developed. Japanese Americans had never seen themselves depicted on the big screen in other than stereotypical roles. Non Japanese Americans had never seen Asian faces in period American clothing engaged in typically American activities of the era. Although we had been told museum visitors spend less than three minutes at any one exhibit, three rows of benches had to be set up to accommodate the many viewers who stayed through the entire 40 minute loop of seven-minute chapters. Because of the popularity of the multiple screen installation, visitors asked if they could purchase a copy. This led to adapting the three-screen installation into a single screen format. We added popular actor George Takei of "Star Trek" fame as host and narrator who introduced each of the home movie segments. Called *Moving Memories*, it received worldwide cable coverage and was translated into Japanese for broadcast in Japan. It was the only media production to receive an Award of Merit from the American Association of State and Local History in 1993 and continues to be one of the museum's store's best sellers.

World War II: Home Movies from America's Concentration Camps

As with the discovery of home movies from the 1920s, finding home movies taken by inmates in what has come to be known as America's concentration camps was another astonishing treasure trove. During World War II, the United States fought in Europe and the Pacific yet there was a battle on the home front as well. Although the U.S. was at war with Italy, Germany and Japan, only Americans of Japanese descent were uprooted from their homes en masse and placed in barbed wire compounds surrounded by armed guards in what the U.S. government itself called concentration camps. By the end of the war, 120,313

Japanese Americans had been incarcerated. These thousands of American residents and citizens were judged without charges, trials or any manner of due process of law. With only two weeks notice, Japanese Americans were forced to sell or abandon their homes and businesses and men, women and children - two-thirds of who were American citizens by birth - were shipped to inland camps in some of the most isolated areas of the country. Although they were incarcerated for allegedly posing a threat to national security, there was no evidence - then or since - to support the accusation. In a country where one is innocent until proven guilty this was an abominable failure of democracy.

When they were evicted from their homes and sent to camp, cameras and radios were considered contraband and confiscated. Over time, a few cameras, including movie cameras, were smuggled in and when restrictions were lifted in some of the camps, cameras and film were more readily brought in by visitors or even mail-ordered through catalogues. We eventually found home movies taken by Japanese Americans from seven of the ten permanent camps. Besides views from within America's concentration camps, these home movies stand in marked defiance to the "official" views, of camp taken by the U.S. government and newsreel companies that were used to rationalize the incarceration.

The home movie genre poignantly captured the irony of trying to conduct such typical American activities as Boy Scouts, football and baseball games within the confines of American concentration camps. Whatever daily activities were filmed, the rows of tarpaper barracks, communal mess-halls and guard towers in the background were ever present. From an outsiders point of view these contradictions are difficult to comprehend. How can a people, so unjustly confined, be smiling? Yet from a Japanese American point of view these home movies reflect the inmates' attempt to make life as normal as possible. While there were tragedies and casualties of incarceration, for the most part the inmates were determined to make the best of a bad situation. These home movies taken by Japanese Americans of their own incarceration reflect the dialectics of a community reinventing itself within a uniquely colonized socio-political environment of containment.

***Something Strong Within* (1994)¹**

Something Strong Within is a video production we made for an exhibition I curated called "America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience." The title is taken from a diary entry that reads, "*Courage is something strong within you that brings out the best in a person. Perhaps no one else may know or see, but it's those hidden things unknown to others, that reveals a person to God and self.*" This quote was placed at the beginning of the film.

Like *Through Our Own Eyes*, *Something Strong Within* exclusively uses home movies as the sole visual element. It does not have a voice-over narration. There are no interviews, no emotional commentary from inmates or analytical discourse by historians or sociologists. Except for a brief textual summary of the incarceration at the beginning of the film, occasional cards containing quotes from inmates, and identification of sequences by home moviemaker and camp, there is little cognitive information presented in the film. Rather we created a multi-layered media piece using a palette of home movies that unfolded and played out to an evocative music score with the purpose of inviting the viewer to emotionally get a feel for – rather than intellectually learn about – camp.

This project was especially relevant to Nakamura who occupied the dual space of filmmaker and unwilling participant in the incarceration. Unlike myself, Bob had spent two years of his childhood in camp and a lifetime coming to grips with it. Called the “godfather of Asian American media” for his pioneering work in the field, Nakamura was the first to explore, interpret and present the history and culture of Japanese Americans on film in the early 1970s.ⁱⁱ Even at a young age he questioned why they had to move from their home to a barracks in the middle of the desert, however it was only later that he learned about the injustice of the incident, especially how much his folks lost and how hard it was for them to rebuild their lives after the war. Camp has become a theme in his work and over his career he has approached it in stills, documentary, narrative and even docu-drama format.

The goal of *Something Strong Within* was to show the resistance that is inherent in the inmates’ conviction to make the best of the situation. It was not intended to be an educational film about camp, it was meant to go beyond the facts and figures. My work with home movies had been on a more strategic level than Nakamura’s. Convinced that they constituted a unique cultural artifact, I was involved at national and international levels in legitimizing their value for preservation as well as championing their importance in the study of history and culture. As part of this larger project to validate home movies, I advocated for their centralization in *Something Strong Within*, to foreground them as documentary footage rather than employing them as simply illustrative background information. Although he had worked with home movie footage in *Through Our Own Eyes* and *Moving Memories*, Nakamura initially thought home movies alone would not be sufficient to tell the story of camp. He thought other elements were needed so we shot many of the artifacts and letters in the museum’s collection and intended to include taped interviews with people who had been in camp. But once he immersed himself in the camp collections, reviewing footage over and over again, he saw them as visual evidence of the ineffable spirit that allowed them to endure their incarceration. The home movies contained a level of verisimilitude that he had not encountered before. They captured the

emotional remnants of camp life that still lay deep within him. “*At that point they sent a chill up my spine. Nothing else had ever given me that visceral feel of being back in camp.*” He sought to enthrall the viewer in the same manner in which he found himself enthralled.

Home movies became the key to why and how we approached “*Something Strong Within*” as we did. By capturing unrepeatable and insular moments in the grainy vision of 8mm film, home movies channeled a deeply personal perspective, compelling the viewer to confront the images like troubling memories. In editing, Nakamura enhanced the immediacy of the moment by going with, instead of against, the small gauge format. He maintained the in-and-out focus and unsteady camera movements. He let the sequences run long in order to provide an embodied sense of being there. Of this approach, film historian Robert Rosen wrote,

Most critically, based on the conviction that the images must speak for themselves, Nakamura adopted the risky and self-effacing strategy of directorial restraint. ... In believing that less can be more, Nakamura embraces an approach to documentary filmmaking reminiscent of Dziga Vertov. Both believe that a film as advocacy is most persuasive not through the message it delivers overtly, but as the result of subtle rhetorical strategies that invite intensive viewer interaction with richly textured images on the screen.ⁱⁱⁱ

We ended *Something Strong Within* with a quote from one of the home moviemakers who simply yet eloquently summarized our sentiments on the significance of home movies. It states,

I hope my home movies share with you one aspect of the camp experience - that is the spirit of the Japanese American community. Despite the loneliness and despair that enveloped us, we made the best we could with the situation. I hope when you will look at the scenes of mochitsuki, pipe repairing, dining hall duty and church service, you look at the spirit of the people. You will see a people trying to reconstruct a community despite overwhelming obstacles. That, I feel, is the essence of these home movies^{iv}.

In the end, like all films, *Something Strong Within* is a mediated event, a collaborative artistic endeavor to show what the title states forthright. It sought not to recapitulate the facts and figures but to maximize the home movie’s ability to bring the viewer into the moment and convey a deeper understanding. Echoing Robert Rosen’s sentiment that it is only when viewers internalize a work that it becomes operative as a cultural force,^v Joy Yamauchi, in a review of *Something Strong Within* wrote, “The true power of this film lies in the fact that it does not apologize for showing scenes of children playing, people laughing and teasing. There is no apology needed.”^{vi}

Significance of Home Movies for People of Color in the U.S.

As a nation of immigrants, the collective impact of all ethnic and cultural groups combine to create the United States. In the process of adapting to this country and transforming our own lives, we have brought a variety of traditions, foods and values that have in turn transformed America. Each culture contains its own assumptions and it is in terms of this cultural integrity, in association with their external environment, that people construct their social, symbolic, real, and even imagined worlds. Home movies, being products of the maker's reality, are particularly important in chronicling the history of ethnic minorities in the United States. Until as recently as the 1967s - and later in many parts of the country - activity in America's minority communities were not considered newsworthy and went unreported and hence undocumented by the mass media. Not until after the Civil Rights Movement and the movements for ethnic pride and liberation of the 1960s and 1970s were people of color reflected in the mainstream media in other than infrequent, usually stereotypic and oftentimes downright racist portrayals. There are no photographic images of America in the mid 20th century *as lived by* Mexican Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans and other ethnic groups - except as recorded and documented by ourselves - in our family albums and family home movies. As such, early home movies provide not only the most authentic portrayals of ethnic American life, but the *only* motion picture documentation of ethnic life from the point of view of those who lived it. They are unique and best surviving records of everyday life of the multi-cultural reality that is the United States and thereby provide a social history of America. By making movies from home movies, we bring them out of the closets and onto the screen - to not only evidence the multiethnic nature of America but to show ourselves through our own eyes.

ⁱ *Something Strong Within* has garnered seven awards and has been screened at festivals and museums around the world.

ⁱⁱ John Esaki, Listing for Robert Akira Nakamura in *Encyclopedia of Japanese American History: An A-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present*, Updated Edition, Brian Niiya, Ed., New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2001 pp. 291-292.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Rosen, "Something Strong Within as Historical Memory," in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 109.

^{iv} Dave Tatsuno, *Something Strong Within*, directed by Robert A. Nakamura, produced by Karen L. Ishizuka for the Japanese American National Museum, 1994.

^vRosen, p. 116.

^{vi} In Karen L. Ishizuka, *Lost and Found: Reclaiming the Japanese American Incarceration*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006, p. 121.