

## **Chinese Americans in Politics**

### **Part 1 - Building the Hawaiian Road to Political Power 1909 to 1945**

**By Philip Chin**

The rise of Chinese Americans in politics is inexorably tied to the history of Hawaii and the unique racial composition of the islands. Chinese Americans, Asian Pacific Islanders, and the Japanese Americans as well as other minorities make up a majority of American citizens in Hawaii, the only state where this demographic fact has always existed.

Hawaii had long been dominated by an oligarchy made up of sugar plantation owners. It was part of their overweening ambition to control Hawaii that led to the sugar planters supporting the overthrow of the native Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 and annexation by the United States in 1898. Eventually five of the sugar plantation companies and the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) coalesced to control all aspect of the Hawaiian economy including most businesses conducted inside and between the islands and the mainland including shipping. Territorial politics were also controlled in order to keep the price of sugar high and the profits rolling in. The five companies were named Castle & Cooke, Alexander & Baldwin, C. Brewer & Co., American Factors (later Amfac), and Theo H. Davies & Co. These companies collectively came to be known as the "Big Five" and they and the HSPA invariably supported the Republicans.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Republican Party had become associated with the big industrial and business interests of the North. Those interests generally supported the gold standard to limit inflation and protect the value of the currency (always important to rich people,) strict budgets to keep the cost of government down, and free immigration to keep labor cheap and competitive with each other (although that didn't prevent them from fully supporting the ban on the immigration of certain minorities such as the Chinese when national sentiment turned against them.) Progressive Republicans such as President Theodore Roosevelt up through the 1930s also favored increased government regulation and regulatory oversight of industry and public services, albeit while keeping costs down. Democrats became associated with the agricultural interests of the South and Midwest and a policy of White supremacy. Their goal at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the introduction of a silver currency to break the gold standard and create inflation so that farmers could more easily pay off their debts. They also favored a complete ban on immigrant labor (especially from Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe) to protect the jobs of white Northwestern European Americans. Both national political parties courted labor votes but labor organizations well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were bastions of and very proud and loud in saying so of white male supremacy.

In Hawaii, Chinese had been brought over to work on the sugar plantations until the Kingdom of Hawaii passed their own Chinese Exclusion Act in 1886. Nevertheless the need for plantation laborers was such that an additional 15,000 Chinese were imported before annexation by the United States in 1898. The highest proportion of the population of Hawaii they ever achieved was 22.2% in 1884 with about 19,000 Chinese. About half of all the Chinese laborers returned to China after their contracts ended so the population was constantly in flux. The strict imposition of the Chinese Exclusion Act by the Americans after 1898 though led the planters to start importing Portuguese and then Japanese laborers until American national sentiment turned against the Japanese soon after the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. Smaller groups from other nations and ethnic communities were also imported. The resulting Japanese immigration ban led to Filipino labor being imported until it too was banned by Congress in 1934. Chinese laborers in the sugarcane fields fell from 50% of workers in 1882 to about 10% by 1902. Many of these laborers gained US citizenship when Hawaii was annexed so they had the right to vote, but there wasn't much the poor workers could do with it.

Votes weren't secret on the plantations. Workers were "encouraged" to vote the way the sugar magnates wanted them to or else they faced the prospect of a beating and not being able to find another job or housing for their families. "The cane field workers lived in camps on the plantations, bought items necessary for their daily lives from the stores operated by the plantation companies, and deducted those charges from their wages. It was a life in which food, clothing, and shelter were all controlled by the company." This led to solid Republican majorities in the territorial legislature and great influence over the views of the territorial governor who was a presidential appointee of whichever political party was in power in the White House. Money in politics as usual talked more than whichever political party label was applied. The HSPA always had a direct say over whoever the president appointed as territorial governor. In Hawaii though, minorities weren't prevented from voting or from running for office as they were on the mainland. As a consequence both major political parties ran candidates of every race in the territory. Native Hawaiians (who made up over 70% of the voters in Hawaii in the 1920s but lost their majority by 1938 because of low birthrates and deaths) and Chinese tended to stay Republican and do what was best for their businesses which were dependent on the HSPA and the sugar planters.

The unfairness of this system of rule by the HSPA and the Big Five led to growing resentment among lower class non-whites over the decades. In 1909, a violent four month strike by Japanese plantation workers had led to the principle of equal pay for equal work regardless of nationality being recognized. But the strikers hadn't been prepared for such a long strike or for how the planters had acted in response so they gained little else. Striking workers and their families had been evicted from their plantation supplied shelters leaving them homeless. Their leaders had also been arrested so they lost direction. Other nationalities also proved willing to work as strikebreakers thus further undermining their position. The planters came to realize the continued danger of having a majority of workers coming from any single nationality or ethnic group and went on an international recruiting spree. From 1908 to 1915 the Japanese percentage of workers were reduced from 70% to 54%. By 1919 there were

43,618 workers on all the sugar plantations in Hawaii, 19,474 of them, or almost half, were Japanese. Filipinos in the next largest group had 13,061 workers.

In 1920, the two major ethnic factions in the sugarcane fields, the Japanese and the Filipinos, along with smaller contingent of about 300 Native Hawaiians, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Koreans, and Mexicans set aside their differences for the first time and went out on strike. About 77% of the sugar plantation labor force, went out on strike. They wanted an eight-hour working day, increased wages to deal with the increased inflation brought about by World War I, an insurance fund for elderly and injured workers, paid maternity leave for women workers, and fairer provisions for paid bonuses. "The wages of common man laborers, which at present are 77 cents per day, shall be increased to \$1.25... And minimum wages for woman laborers shall be fixed at 95 cents per day." The plantation owners responded following the same script from 1909, throwing the striking workers out of their plantation provided housing and into overcrowded camps and tenements. The overcrowded and close living conditions of these shelters helped spread the flu, part of the pandemic that killed between 50 to 100 million people worldwide from 1918 to 1920. The 150 deaths among the workers and their families from the disease further embittered relations between the workers and the sugar planters as the deaths were seen as entirely preventable.

The strike lasted for six long months. The newly created Japanese Federation of Labor with the community's hard won experience from the 1909 strike had raised a war chest of nearly a million dollars to support themselves. The Filipino Federation of Labor though hadn't prepared for a strike at all and their members had acted precipitously, going out on strike before even making sure the Japanese workers were with them and even against the orders of their own leaders to delay the strike. The Japanese had wanted to gather even more resources before striking but were then forced to act in solidarity with the striking Filipinos a week later. The Filipinos ended up relying on donations from the Japanese strike fund to keep going. The situation became untenable with the planter controlled press whipping up white hysteria with the accusation that the strike was a foreign conspiracy led by the Japanese government and largely fueled by the Japanese language press in an effort to control the American sugar industry.

The HSPA announced that they would be happy to meet with the representatives of the workers as long as they weren't representing the labor unions. In other words they would not recognize that the workers had any right to collective bargaining or to be represented by any labor union. At the meeting the representatives were told that no concessions at all would be granted. HSPA announced a complete victory for the planters when the workers returned to their jobs. Three months later the HSPA quietly increased wages by 50% and agreed to pay bonuses monthly rather than yearly, a key demand of the strike. Social welfare and recreational activities were also increased. After teaching such a painful lesson to the unions the HSPA felt that it could afford to be paternally benevolent and ease some of the grievances. However, the workers had learned the lesson that unity across racial lines and thorough preparation in advance was the only way for their grievances to be heard. On April 23, 1921 the Japanese Federation of Labor formally became the Hawaii Laborers' Association marking the start of building a multiracial coalition. Nevertheless the Filipinos launched another

rolling strike in 1924 that lasted for six months and was crushed with the deaths of sixteen workers and four police officers and many deportations. The Filipinos tried again in 1937 and were again crushed. The territorial laws were simply strengthened to repress unions even more. Going it alone without the other racial groups in Hawaii obviously would not get anyone anywhere.

The 1932 Massie case further inflamed racial tensions in Hawaii and further turned non-whites away from the ruling establishment in Hawaii. It also led to a growing split among non-white Republicans and the white Republican establishment. Thalia Massie was the wife in an unhappy marriage with a young Navy officer, Lieutenant Thomas Massie. Through her father she was related to the Roosevelt family including President Theodore Roosevelt and future President Franklin Roosevelt and through her mother was related to Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. After getting drunk at a Navy event at a Waikiki nightclub she slapped an officer and stumbled out into the night. She later reported having been raped. At about the same time as the alleged rape five young men were involved in a near car accident on the other side of Oahu and punches were exchanged over who was at fault. The five friends were Horace Ida, Joe Kahahawai, Benny Ahakuelo, David Takai, and Henry Chang. Two were Hawaiian, two were Japanese, and one was Chinese-Hawaiian. The white couple involved reported the incident and an all points bulletin was put out by the police for their arrest giving their descriptions and their license plate number. Someone then seized upon the idea that they were involved in the Massie case so upon arrest they were brought up in front of Thalia Massie who failed to recognize any of them. The next day however she "remembered" details of the clothes Horace Ida had been wearing (coincidentally the same ones she saw him wearing in police custody) and quoted their license plate number which was off by only one digit. With this conclusive and damning evidence the police arrested all five young men and charged them with kidnapping, assault, and rape. The enraged white controlled press in Hawaii and the US Navy immediately pressed for quick trials and lengthy sentences to be handed out for this outrage against white womanhood by these non-white animals. Threats of lynching were also heard.

The only problem with the case against the young men was that it couldn't possibly have happened in light of the evidence. The men would have had to have been in their near car accident and fight on one side of Oahu then raced across the island in record time to commit the rape. No eyewitnesses at all could be found to testify to such a race across the island or could place any of the men anywhere close to Thalia Massie at the time she alleged. In fact no evidence that a rape had actually occurred was ever produced. Native Hawaiian and non-white police officers and detectives noticed these missing details and began leaking stories that maybe Thalia Massie wasn't the example of outstanding white womanhood that was being highlighted by the popular press. These anonymous smears further enraged Thalia's husband and her mother, Grace Fortescue.

With such obvious holes in the case and racist sentiment causing unrest across Hawaii for months, the three-week trial in 1932 ended with the jurors deadlocked and was declared a mistrial. Horace Ida was abducted and beaten nearly to death by a carload of Navy sailors. Joe Kahahawai, boxer and member of the Hawaii National Guard, was

abducted by Lieutenant Massie, Grace Fortescue, and two Navy sailors, and was then stripped naked and beaten in order to obtain a "confession" to the rape. One of the sailors, Albert Jones, before his death in 1966, said that, "Massie had asked a question and Kahahawai had lunged at him. I say 'lunged.' Somebody else might say he leaned forward." Whereupon Jones said he shot Kahahawai dead. All four murderers were caught by a suspicious police officer with the corpse in their curtained car while taking it to the desolate area of Koko Head for disposal.

The trial of the four for murder caused a sensation across the United States. Hawaii, which had been enjoying growing prestige as an island paradise for vacationers was suddenly being seen as a place where the majority of the population was infected with anti-white hatred. A syndicated Hearst editorial called Hawaii "— a place where 'the roads go through jungles, and in those remote places bands of degenerate natives lie in wait for white women driving by.'" "Time Magazine blamed the killing of Joseph Kahahawai on the victim and his friends, describing them as 'five brown-skinned young bucks' who demonstrated the well-known 'lust of mixed breeds for white women' when they raped Thalia Massie in the first place." The New York Post even called for a battleship to be used to rescue the accused murderers from the Hawaiian civil authorities.

Clarence Darrow, the most famous lawyer of that era (Scopes Monkey Trial among other famous cases) was hired for the defense. After being ruined financially by the Great Depression Darrow badly needed the large amount of money being offered to defend the case. Darrow successfully argued that the murder could be seen as what would now be termed a "honor killing." This shameful argument the public prosecutor likened to that being offered in defense of blacks being lynched across the South for supposedly raping white women. "The jury was made up of three haole-Hawaiians, two local Chinese, one Portuguese, and six whites." All of the jurors had close connections to either the sugar business or the US Navy who were all desperate to see this case go away. The jurors were widely expected to deliver either a verdict of innocent or divide in a mistrial. Instead the jurors refused to bow to the intense pressure and unanimously found the defendants guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter.

All four were sentenced to ten years in prison amid angry denunciations and talk of riots across all the non-white communities in Hawaii for such leniency and angry denunciations and talk of riots from the white community and the US Navy for convicting upstanding white citizens for simply defending sacred white American womanhood. This was a mess for the administration of President Herbert Hoover, the US Navy, the territorial governor, Lawrence Judd, and the sugar planters who all knew that racial turmoil and rioting would do no one's business any good. They quickly agreed on a solution to the problem to avoid martial law having to be imposed and ending civilian rule in Hawaii. Governor Judd commuted all the sentences to one hour to be served in the governor's office. All four convicts and Thalia Massie were then quickly sent out of Hawaii a few days later. Without Thalia Massie available to testify the rape case retrials of the four remaining defendants were dismissed and the island authorities tried to forget the entire matter.

The lesson that the non-white people of Hawaii took from this was that white Republicans and the island establishment were willing to overlook any crime committed by whites against them. The friends and real victims of this case, the young men, came from all the major non-white ethnic groups in Hawaii. The racial bigotry and bias displayed only made these groups feel closer to one another and more estranged from the whites. Princess Abigail Kawānanakoa, leader of the overthrown Hawaiian monarchists and conservative Republican, had publicly voiced her opposition to the "travesty" of a racially divided justice system, "one for the favored few and another for the people in general" after hearing from Joe Kahahawai's mother soon after the original rape charges were brought. Minorities across all the social classes felt threatened regardless of their political affiliation. What the case provided for whites in the United States though was used an argument to prevent Hawaii from becoming a state for the next thirty seven years. Who among them really wanted an anti-white (the same as being anti-American in their eyes) majority state within the United States?

The demographics of the islands were changing as more forward looking members of the Republican and Democratic Parties were coming to recognize this fact. The foreign-born Asians who'd never been granted the right to naturalize by Congress were having children who were being born as American citizens with the right to vote thanks to the 1898 Supreme Court case of *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*. Those younger Hawaiians were becoming politically aware and active and were leaving the plantations behind for the urban center of Honolulu but they had no strong outlet for their energy in what was effectively a one party system. With the Democratic Party in Hawaii being more or less powerless during this time (80% of all members of the Hawaiian territorial legislature were Republican from 1900 to 1940) more radical political factions among labor organizations such as the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Communist Party became increasingly influential in Hawaii.

In 1935, the United States Congress, now dominated by New Deal Democrats led by President Franklin Roosevelt, had passed the National Labor Relations Act (aka Wagner Act) which recognized the right of unions to organize, engage in collective bargaining, and strike. To enforce the act the legislation also created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB.) The HSPA had fought both the 1909 and 1920 strikes precisely against these rights. It was no surprise then that Hawaii was one of the places which announced a categorical refusal to comply with the Wagner Act. Nevertheless the Hilo Longshoremen's Association was formed on November 22, 1935. By 1937 they had spread out into other industries forming the Hilo Laundry Workers' Association, Hilo Longshoremen's Association, Hilo Canec Association, Hilo Clerks' Association, Hilo Railroad Association, and the Honuapo Longshoremen's Association. Rejected by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which questioned their "Americanism" (a code word often used by the AFL to question the willingness of other unions to recruit Asians and other non-whites as members) they joined the ILWU which in turn was associated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO.) Their joint demonstration against replacement workers being used to replace unionized dockworkers resulted in the so-called Hilo Massacre on August 1, 1938 where police fired on a peaceful dockyard protest and wounded over fifty people.

"The regional director of the newly organized NLRB charged with enforcing the Wagner Act, reported that laborers in Hawaii were 'more like slaves than free people. . . They have no chance to change their jobs or get away from their present environment. They speak and mumble in undertones.' He described Hawaii as a 'picture of Fascism' in which workers suspected of union sympathies were quickly identified and blacklisted."

World War II changed Hawaii more than most other parts of the United States. The war started there at Pearl Harbor and suddenly the entire territory was on the front lines of the war and under martial law where all strikes were banned. Hawaii was the largest and closest base the Americans had to Japan and would be at the center of the push to retake the Pacific. Millions of servicemen would pass through Hawaii on their way to other parts of the Pacific and Asia and many of them would move there after the war ended. A key problem for the US Government though was that a great many of the inhabitants were ethnic Japanese holding key positions on the islands. Arresting all of the Japanese Americans as they had done on the West Coast of the United States and shipping them off to internment camps would collapse the entire Hawaiian economy and cripple the war effort at a time when America's military fortunes were at their lowest ebb. An uneasy relationship developed where the United States Government viewed the Japanese Americans with suspicion but had no choice but to rely on them to win the war in the Pacific.

Eventually it was decided not to waste what trained military manpower there already was in Hawaii. Japanese American members of the University of Hawaii ROTC and the Hawaiian National Guard were allowed to form their own segregated unit in the US Army to fight in Europe. The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion became known as the "Purple Heart Battalion" for the high number of casualties and bravery they showed in fighting in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Their fine example led the Army to order the formation of another Japanese American unit drafted from both Hawaiian and mainland Japanese Americans. The two combined units were named the 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team. Their heroics and determination (eventually culminating in 20 Medals of Honor belatedly awarded in 2000 to join the single one awarded during World War II) in combat across Italy and Northern Europe, particularly their rescue of the "Lost Battalion" from the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Texas Division) in 1944. The great publicity the unit received led to very changed attitudes among many white Americans about the loyalty of Japanese Americans. Two distinguished names from this unit would soon become major names in Hawaiian and then national politics, Spark Matsunaga and Daniel Inouye.

At the same time World War II saw an intense propaganda campaign to present the Chinese in a positive light to the American public and to keep China in the war against Japan. This led directly to the Magnuson Act repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. Among the Chinese American veterans was another soon to be major name who would win respect from all races and across the political spectrum, Hiram Fong, who'd started his political career in the Hawaiian Territorial House of Representatives in 1938.

More and more white Americans, both in the military and in the public, saw the evidence with their own eyes. They worked with Asian Americans and got to know them

in the military and in factories across the country. Servicemen traveled through Hawaii by the millions. Many saw Asian Americans through newsreels when they'd been completely ignored before. They saw that Asian Americans were just as loyal as any white American was.

The war had also changed the mindset of many of the Hawaiian veterans immensely as well. Limited to the plantations, farms, and to other menial jobs in Hawaii and across the United States and with oftentimes limited education, the majority of Asian and Pacific Islanders had had no greater view of the world than what could be seen in their own neighborhood or ethnic enclave. Now they had traveled all around the world and knew things could be different and that much bigger things could be achieved with their lives. Many also had become officers or assumed other leadership roles that placed them in command above whites, a complete reversal of what they were used to. The veterans also came back armed with the GI Bill that would pay their way through college and improve their prospects in that suddenly wider world even further. The old system of absolute control by the sugar planters was about to crumble because of those World War II veterans and the multiethnic coalitions they were building to bring about those changes in Hawaii. Those Asian Americans would later help bring about further changes that would shake the nation and the world.

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