

Monterey's first Japanese American Heritage Days revives fishing history

Heritage Days includes traditional food, arts, music

By Jennie Tezak

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"Pop" Ernest Doelter, "The Abalone King," surveys his kingdom on the Monterey wharf, circa 1930. (Photo courtesy of Tim Thomas)

MONTEREY >> The Japanese were once major players in the fishing industry of the Monterey Peninsula, and this weekend they will be celebrated in a new two-day event, Japanese American Heritage Days, on Old Fisherman's Wharf.

Larry Oda, past national president of the Japanese American Citizens League, said the festival revives a history that has been pretty much forgotten.

"Prior to World War II, the Japanese had a commanding presence on the wharf," said Oda. "The majority of the businesses were either owned or operated by Japanese. With World War II and the so-called evacuation of the Japanese from the West Coast, that presence on the wharf ended."



This ceremonial Maiwai jacket, given to fishermen after a really good fishing season, was made by Suzuki Kousuke and is a recreation of one made about 1900. There are two of the original Monterey abalone Maiwais known to exist today, one currently on exhibit at the Monterey JACL Heritage Center. (Photo courtesy of Tim Thomas)

The idea of the festival originated last fall with archivist, historian and Japanese league board member Tim Thomas.

"I was looking for a way to celebrate the Maiwai jacket coming here," he said, referring to a ceremonial jacket given to fishermen after a really good season, a tradition that goes back centuries. "I saw they were doing a Columbus Day event to celebrate the Italians, so I went to their board and said we should do something about the Japanese."

A recreation of the Monterey abalone jacket, hand-crafted and painted, will be presented during a ceremony at 4 p.m. Saturday. There are two originals of the jacket, one in Japan and one in the Monterey league's museum.

"I thought a couple years ago they're so scarce, I thought we could get them recreated," Thomas said.

The festival also includes a number of abalone-themed events, including a cooking demonstration and poetry competition.

"Everything began with abalone," said Thomas, whose new book "The Abalone King of Monterey: 'Pop' Ernest Doelter, Pioneering Japanese Fishermen and the Culinary Classic that Saved an Industry," will be released this month.



The Japanese were once major players in the fishing industry of the Monterey Peninsula. (Photo courtesy of Tim Thomas)

Without the abalone, Thomas said, sardine fisheries would not have existed. Japanese fishermen came here to dive for abalone and salmon and brought new technology with them.

"It's been forgotten," he said. "This is a good opportunity for us to bring that back, that history."

Pop Ernest started a restaurant and began to "experiment with abalone when no one around here knew what to do with it," Thomas said. He dreamed up a famous recipe where the abalone is pounded and breaded and cooked with olive oil, and he introduced fresh abalone steak to the world.

Cooking demonstrations are part of the festival, along with ikebana and bonsai demonstrations, a historic photo exhibit of Japanese fishermen in Monterey, Taiko drums and other live musical performances, historic walking tours and the jacket ceremony, which includes a parade with dignitaries and lion dancers heading from the wharf to the Japanese league hall. Wharf restaurants will serve small bites of Japanese dishes.

"I think it'll be a really a good time," Thomas said. "I think it will attract a lot of tourists, but will be good for the community."

Oda's father and grandfather were both fishermen, and he has lived in Monterey all of his life.

"It's been a little journey of discovery of myself, learning about what happened," he said. "Older folks told me, 'I remember your grandfather's cannery.'" (It's now a wing of the aquarium.)

After World War II was winding down, the Japanese were allowed to return to their homes, in Salinas, but people didn't want them to come back. In 1942 resolutions passed in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties, discouraging the Japanese from returning.

"In Monterey a group felt that we had as much right to come and live here and work in whatever industry we wanted. A signed petition welcomed the Japanese back," Oda said.

Oda is most excited about the festival's demonstrations, including Tukutu (fish stenciling), which started off as a practical way of measuring and documenting fish that were caught.

"It will be a lot of activities for adults and children, such as origami and learning how to arrange flowers and make miniature trees," he said.

Thomas is looking forward to a "Pop" Earnest lookalike contest and the poetry contest. The prize will be a copy of his book.

There will also be six "honored guests" coming from Tatiama, Japan.

"The wharf people are talking about this becoming an annual event. They want to start doing more and more of these things; I've been pushing them a lot. It draws people onto the wharf," Thomas said. "The wharf is not just a bunch of restaurants and T-shirt shops. There's a reason why it's there."

There will be a reception at the league hall after the Maiwai ceremony, and the building's museum will be open.

"Look at the phone book — a lot of the Japanese were represented on the wharf," Oda said. "That's why their parents and grandparents came to the United States. It's a nice recognition for them."

Jennie Tezak is a Herald correspondent.

If you go

What: Japanese American Heritage Days

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May 3-4

Where: Old Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey

Cost: Free

Information: Contact Bob Massaro at 649-6544 or bmassaro@bostrommanagement.com