

## Pearl Harbor Day: Local and National Impact

By

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December 7, 1941, marks one of the most defining moments in American history. In the months before that day, tensions between the United States and Japan had escalated dramatically. Japan, pursuing expansion in East Asia and the Pacific, faced economic sanctions from the U.S., including an oil embargo, which threatened its resource-intensive ambitions. Diplomatically, both sides remained locked in a stalemate, and the Japanese leadership concluded that only a powerful, preemptive strike against the U.S. Pacific Fleet could neutralize American opposition. A specially tasked Japanese fleet carried carriers, submarines, and support vessels across the Pacific in radio silence, laying the foundation for a devastating surprise attack.

On the morning of December 7, waves of Japanese aircraft descended on Pearl Harbor. Beginning at around 7:55 a.m., torpedo planes, dive-bombers, and fighters struck U.S. naval vessels and airfields. The *USS Arizona* was hit by a bomb that detonated its forward magazine, killing more than 1,100 sailors in a single explosion. Simultaneously, airfields at Hickam, Wheeler, and Ford Island came under furious attacks, destroying aircraft on the ground. Thick columns of black smoke rose from burning oil, and harbors erupted in flames. Throughout the attack, American service members displayed remarkable valor: sailors carried wounded comrades to safety, gunners rallied under fire, and pilots scrambled into the skies despite grave risk. By 10 a.m., the assault had ended. The toll: over 2,400 Americans killed or wounded, key battleships wrecked or sunk, and vital infrastructure devastated. Crucially, though, Japan failed to destroy the U.S. aircraft carriers; *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, and *Lexington* which were not in port that day. Their survival would prove pivotal in the Pacific war that followed.

The day after the attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed Congress, calling December 7 “a date which will live in infamy.” Congress declared war on Japan, and within days Germany and Italy also declared war on the U.S., launching America fully into the global conflict that was World War II. The nation mobilized swiftly: factories converted to war production, enlistment surged, and citizens from all social classes contributed to the war effort.

Yet, the shock of Pearl Harbor was not confined to the battlefield. Fear, suspicion, and wartime nationalism fueled a wave of restrictive policies directed at Japanese Americans. In February 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving military

commanders expansive power to remove people from designated military zones. In Santa Clara County, this led to Civilian Exclusion Order No. 96, in which thousands of Japanese Americans were forced to report to the men's gymnasium at San José State College (at 4th and San Carlos Streets). Families packed their lives into suitcases, uncertain if anything could be salvaged, and gathered in long lines for processing. From there, they were sent to temporary assembly centers, then to permanent camps in remote areas across the country, including in Arizona, Utah, and Wyoming.

Before this upheaval, the Japanese American community in Santa Clara County was strong and deeply rooted. San José's Japantown, also known as Nihonmachi, had been established by Japanese immigrant laborers in the late 19th century and had become a vibrant enclave by the 1920s and 1930s. The neighborhood featured boarding houses, shops, language schools, social clubs, and places of worship. Important community buildings included the Issei Memorial Building, Okida Hall, and the Taihei Hotel. When internment came, the once-bustling Nihonmachi emptied overnight. Homes and businesses were vacated, and community structures fell silent. After the war, though, descendants returned and rebuilt stores reopened, community organizations reformed, and cultural life gradually revived. The Japanese American Museum of San José preserves this history, providing a living archive of stories of farming, business, and community resilience.

Remembrance of this forced removal is also embodied in public art. In downtown San José, sculptor Ruth Asawa, who was herself incarcerated as a young woman, created a bronze relief memorial that bears witness to the experiences of Japanese Americans before, during, and after their removal. The panels depict farmland, barbed wire, guard towers, and the difficult process of return. San José State University acknowledges the role its campus played in this chapter of history through an annual Day of Remembrance, when students, faculty, and community members walk to the memorial, reflect on the past, and reassert commitment to civil rights.

Further south, in Gilroy, the story of Japanese American life takes on another deeply meaningful form. Japanese immigrants began settling in the Gilroy area in the early 20th century, working in orchards, vineyards, and vegetable farms. They established family farms growing garlic, prunes, and other produce and built social institutions including Buddhist temples, social clubs, and language schools. In 1938, H. K. Sakata, a Japanese American farmer, purchased the Gilroy Hot Springs, transforming it into a resort that catered to both cultural retreat and relaxation. During World War II, Sakata was interned along with many of his fellow Japanese Americans, but he retained ownership of the property.

After returning from incarceration, Sakata reopened the resort, now renamed Gilroy Yamato Hot Springs, as a sanctuary for Japanese Americans returning home from the camps. The site became a place of healing, gathering, and reconnection. For many, it was more than a resort; it was a spiritual and cultural refuge. Today, Yamato Hot Springs is recognized on the National Register of Historic Places and is a California Historical Landmark, acknowledging not just its architectural history but also its role as a haven for a displaced community. California State Parks Volunteers and preservationists continue working to reopen and restore the site. Historic documents and architectural studies show its transformation under Sakata’s vision, blending Japanese garden design with mid-century American resort infrastructure.

The legacy of Pearl Harbor in Gilroy is also carried forward through personal stories. Charles “Chuck” Verbanic, a sailor on board the *USS Tennessee* during the attack, later shared in community events how he staffed his battle station under fire, passed ammunition, and witnessed the smoke and chaos of that morning. His recollections, told in Gilroy-area forums, make the global scale of Pearl Harbor palpably local—an event that shaped not just national policy, but individual lives in this community.

At the state level, California formally recognizes Pearl Harbor Day each year. By law, California Government Code section 6716 mandates that the Governor issue an annual proclamation designating December 7 as “Pearl Harbor Day.” In keeping with this requirement, Governor Gavin Newsom has issued proclamations in recent years; for example, on December 7, 2024, he formally declared it “Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day,” honoring the sacrifices of those who died and those who defended their country in the wake of the surprise attack. These proclamations not only commemorate the military significance of December 7, but also reinforce California’s recognition of the personal, civic, and cultural legacies tied to that date.

Across Santa Clara County, remembrance takes many forms: the Asawa memorial in San José, the Japanese American Museum, preservation efforts at Yamato Hot Springs, oral histories, and community-led events all contribute to a living memory of Pearl Harbor. These commemorations capture both the heroism of war and the quieter, complex story of civil liberties and community resilience. Pearl Harbor Day, in this context, becomes not just a moment of national mourning, but a lens through which to examine what happens when fear overtakes justice—and how communities can rebuild when hope prevails.

In remembering December 7, we honor not only those who perished in Hawaii but also those whose lives were forever changed on the home front: the farm families of Santa Clara Valley, the returnees to Japantown, the resilient visitors of Yamato Hot Springs, and the veterans who shared their stories. Their collective history reminds us that

remembrance is not passive, it is an active pledge to preserve dignity, defend civil rights, and pass on the lessons of the past to future generations.