Colorado’s Japanese Americans: From 1886 to the Present.

By Bill Hosokawa. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005. xviii + 270 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, index. $45.00 (cloth); $19.95 (paper).

Colorado’s Japanese Americans opens cleverly by posing the question: "what have the Japanese... done in the century they have been in Colorado to make it a better state, a better place? What have they done for themselves, and for America?" The answer, Hosokawa’s answer provides is "much" (p. 245). This richly detailed history of the Japanese American experience in Colorado is a welcome addition to the trend toward local and regional historical trend studies in Japanese American history. As such, it provides a very detailed, predominantly narrative account of those of Japanese ancestry who have called Colorado home for more than one hundred years.

Hosokawa, a well-known and widely respected journalist and writer, digs up and reveals new and revealing historical sources using such as documents, letters, unseen journals, and stories, which provide original historical insights to better understanding the lives of Colorado’s Japanese Americans in Colorado. Hosokawa’s "folksy’-folksy" style and clear
writing make the book an accessible and enjoyable read. However, scholarly historians may be come away from the book a bit disappointed because Hosokawa addresses this head on when he explains that he has not used footnotes in the text because he feels that they break up the flow of the story. The one drawback to this is that the this book could be interpreted as existing in a historical scholarly vacuum when it is clear that Hosokawa actually draws on a deep legacy of Japanese American historians such as Brian Hayashi, Ron Takaki, Lane Hirabayashi, Lon Kurashige, Brian Niiya, and Evelyn Nakano-Glenn without crediting them. In this sense, the book is a bit dated and does not take advantage of the reference newer Japanese American histories y books with broader analytical and theoretical contributions.

The book Hosokawa begins by looking both forward and back at prominent Japanese American figures in Colorado’s past and present and then moves chronologically through the Japanese American experiences in the railroad, coal, and steel industries in Colorado—thereby diverging from the predominance of the agricultural story in Japanese American stories set communities elsewhere. He then delves more deeply into the experiences of Shingo Nakamura drawing upon, which is based on recently translated journals dating from 1906 forward. Nakamura’s story is a quintessentially
Japanese American in his farming experiences of renting but (not owning a farm because of the Alien Land Law) a farm and then arranging a marriage to a woman from Japanese American (Kichi). Perhaps unusual was his ability to see how attending church and tithing with hakujins (whites) might serve to further integrate Japanese Americans in Colorado. Perhaps due to the small size of their population, there seems to have been more friendly relations with the larger hakujins community in Colorado before, during, and after World War II than might be true in other “inland” Japanese American communities. Hosokawa details the adoption of Christianity, and the importance of the Simpson United Methodist Church, and the establishment of the Buddhist Temple and the low-rent Tamai Towers (low-rent housing), and as well as the importance of associations in assisting Japanese Americans in Colorado perhaps when others wouldn’t. Although Japanese Coloradoans did not share He then chronicles the experience during the west coast evacuation, which Japanese American Coloradoans didn’t experience, but they were crucial in providing safe haven for those who did. He also discusses the establishment of the ‘relocation center’ Amache in Granada on the Eastern border with Kansas.
The post-war Japanese American community grew along with many others in the Midwest such as Chicago, Illinois and St. Paul, Minnesota. He discusses how the growing community and one which was spreading its roots deep into Colorado’s soil by establishing newspapers (Rocky Shimpo), Japanese American Citizens League (ACL) chapters (the Mile-hi JACL), geographic landmarks (Sakura Square), and Japanese American business interests (Sumitomo).

The book covers contemporary issues such as the spread of interest in Japanese food, sushi and the like, the visit of the Imperials to Colorado, quilting, farming, and DOR (Day of Remembrance) and Veteran ceremonies which remind us of Japanese American sacrifices of the past. Overall, the book covers a large span of historical time and a wide diversity of the Japanese American experience in Colorado. Academic readers will appreciate Hosokawa’s chapters on the why and how all this happened (26), the associations (9) and chapters on the war (9, 10, 11) will be interesting to a wider academic audience as they provide interesting new historical first-hand data. The discovery of the Nakamura journals (Ch. 6) would also be a mine of new data for some enterprising scholar to perhaps explore further. The oOther chapters will no doubt be of appeal more interest to the local Japanese American community
seeking in order to contextualize their present experiences and see the names of their forefathers and mothers.

Hosokawa’s snappily-styled chapters are short and it is easy to skip around in the book to find the bits that interest you most. The downside is that on many topics you are left wanting more. The book does offer much new information and points to the new ways (although never takes it up in full) to see understanding the uniqueness of how the Colorado Japanese American community was unique in that its isolation from other Japanese American communities was greater, its existence was “beyond the pale” of World War II “prohibited zones,” and its often had good relations with hakujin neighbors, colleagues, and even politicians like Governor Ralph Carr. I would have liked more to have seen discussion of issues around such as the future of the Japanese American community in Colorado—where is going in the future, how the handling of issues of interracial marriage and multiracial Japanese Americans are being dealt with, and how women contributed to the community’s larger history and success of Japanese Americans in Colorado.

All in all, Hosokawa’s book makes a valuable contribution to the diversification of Japanese American history. It combines local reporting with a
broader history and perspective that should appeal to scholars and the general public alike.

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