Episode 6, 2003: Japanese House
Gilroy, California

Gwen: The final investigation comes from Gilroy, a rural town 80 miles south of San Francisco. Most of the houses in Gilroy are no different from what you’d find in many California towns: Spanish-colonial, Victorian, ranch style. But one house here stands out from the rest. It looks like a traditional Japanese house. It’s beautiful. But it seems a long way from home. What on earth is it doing here 5,000 miles from Japan? Lawson and Moniko Sukai have lived here for over 30 years, but it’s been in Mrs. Sukai’s family, the Hirosakis, since 1941.

Sukai: My dad and mother lived in the house until 1960. We’ve lived in this house for about 43 years now. Our children all grew up here.

Gwen: This house is very unique. We’ve seen other houses built on the Japanese architectural style with the shoji screens and all. They’re very modern, and they’re not like this house. This is really different because, by comparison, this is almost a museum piece. So how did this seemingly classic example of traditional Japanese architecture end up in a rural California town? I’m Gwen Wright, and I’ve come to Gilroy to investigate this international mystery. Your house is so beautiful, Mr. And Mrs. Sukai. Tell me something about its history.

Sukai: This was originally from the San Francisco world’s fair in 1939 and it was part of the Japanese pavilion there.

Gwen: That’s extraordinary, but how did it get to be here in Gilroy?

Sukai: My dad purchased parts of it after the fair was over and had it trucked down. And it was built by six Japanese carpenters from San Jose. It took them about nine months to build and it was completed in October, 1941.

Gwen: Oh, so it was completed just two months before Pearl Harbor. Wow, many layers of history in this. What would you like for me to try to find out for you?

Sukai: I wonder why the Japanese government would create a nice pavilion like this and bring it to the World’s Fair in San Francisco. Why would they go to the expense and trouble to produce this and bring it over here for an exhibit? There’s nothing in the books about it, so there’s a piece of history there that’s missing. It’s the dates that really intrigued me. Why would the Japanese send a pavilion to the World’s Fair in San Francisco just as they were preparing to launch an attack on the u.s.?

Gwen: And I also need to be sure the Sukais’ house did come from the World’s Fair. It’s a lovely home, but how could it have been part of a major international exhibition? In their heyday, world’s fairs were events of an international scale. Before the television era, they were a crucial way for nations to communicate to a mass audience. Thousand of people came to the different national pavilions to see new inventions, learn about other cultures and just have fun. 64 years ago, San Francisco held a World’s Fair. Today I’m across the bay in Berkeley, to meet professor Marvin Nathan, an expert on world’s fair histories. I’m hoping he can tell me more about the 1939 exposition, especially the Japan pavilion.

Marvin: What I have here is the official guide book for the Golden Gate International Exposition. And at the beginning of this book, there’s this large fold-out map. So there’s all kinds of exhibitions, everything from machinery and food and education, all manner of human creativity. Among the national pavilions, the Japanese pavilion was one of the largest, perhaps the largest. And it was a very elaborate pavilion. It had five or six exhibition rooms. It had beautiful gardens. It had a gorgeous bridge that was a recreation of the famous bridge at Kyoto. And so the Japanese put a good deal of effort and expense into creating the illusion of traditional Japanese art and detail.

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives
Episode 6, 2003: Japanese House
Gilroy, California

Gwen: What was the theme of the San Francisco fair?

Marvin: The theme was “Pageant of the Pacific,” and it was an attempt to bring in all of the countries whose shores touched the Pacific into a self-conscious commercial trading unit where relationships among countries could be carried on peacefully. And what you’re looking at here is the signature piece of statuary at the fair, the goddess Pacifica. 80 feet tall, huge statue. And the title “Pacifica” has a double meaning. Part of it, of course, has to do with the new Pacific community, but also the word “Pacific” means peaceful. So you have a kind of plaintive call for the continuance of peace, so such commerce and friendly relations could continue.

Gwen: The theme of Pacifica, or peace, is very intriguing to me, considering world events in 1939. A visit to the San Francisco public library may confirm a hunch I have. As these photo accounts from “Life” magazine illustrate, the Pacific region was anything but peaceful in the years leading up to the 1939 World’s Fair. In a bold show of military power, Japan had just invaded China. Anti-Japanese sentiment was growing strong in the United States. One image in particular galvanized public opinion: a Chinese infant, alone and sobbing in the midst of battlefield rubble. It was a very famous picture all over the world, seen by some 136 million people in newspapers and even in movie theaters. It fueled even more anti-Japanese sentiment. Then, in 1937, what became known as “The Panay incident.” Japanese forces attacked and sank an American ship operating in occupied Chinese waters, and three Americans were killed. This information puts the 1939 World’s Fair in a new light. A U.S.-based fair with a pacifist theme may have been an ideal opportunity for Japan to clean up their image in the eyes of the American public. A quick search in the Japanese-American history archives in San Francisco confirms this. Looking through Japanese American newspapers, there is much talk of peace. And there’s more. This must be the official Japanese publication about the golden gate exhibition, written in Japanese and English. And here’s a greeting from the consulate general of Japan. He writes, “Her fond hope to perpetuate lasting peace among the various nationals bordering on the Pacific.”

Hello, Mr. Fugazowa. While he searches for evidence, I’ll turn my attention back to the Sukais’ house itself. Okay. Very good. I’ll speak to you soon. I need to determine what part it actually played in the pavilion. I’ve come to the Japanese tea garden in Golden Gate Park with Kendall Brown, an expert on Japanese architecture.

Kendall: The pavilion was very large and it was built in a sort of semi-samurai castle, Japanese Buddhist style, but within this large structure there are a number of small rooms. The Japanese were quite keen on showing domestic feminine culture really as an antidote in many ways to the dominant popular image of Japan as a military-aggressive culture to the whole notion of tranquility, beauty, craftsmanship. Femininity was throughout the pavilion inside. One of the rooms was the silk room, which was constructed to show off and demonstrate Japanese silk industry, which was one of the major export industries.

Gwen: And the silk room, the tranquil heart of the Japanese pavilion, answers my question. If you look closely, you can see that in a modified form, it’s actually the central part of the house the Sukais live in today, over 60 years later. My researcher in Tokyo has faxed through some government documents that were declassified just 10 years ago. Michael Ozowa, a local translator, is helping me go through them.

Michael: These are the documents from the ministry of foreign affairs in Japan, and these discuss Japan’s intention to participate in that expo in San Francisco back in 1939. Let me just read this to you. Let’s see. [Reading in Japanese] yeah, right here, it says, it’s very important for Japan to take this opportunity and participate in this San Francisco expo. Ever since the china war, the image of Japan has been worsening. This is a very good opportunity to lessen the ill feelings harbored by Americans. This is a pretty clear insight into Japa-
Chinese government thinking at the time. How ironic that this beautiful room’s original purpose was as a piece of propaganda. The brochures that were put out said that Japan wanted peace in the Pacific Rim, which was the theme of the exhibition. Official documents from the ministry of foreign affairs in Japan tell a different story: that they saw the symbolism of harmony and tranquility as a way to deflect attention from the international shock about the atrocities of Japanese expansion in other parts of Asia.

Gwen: That’s very interesting. So they painted a new face on the whole thing.

Michael: I can show you exactly what this house was at the fair. This is a catalog about the pavilion.

Gwen: My goodness. Oh, my. So here it was. Here was the major part, the pagoda, and I want to show you within it. This was the silk room. This was your house.

Sukai: I think we have one of these windows.

Gwen: Throughout this investigation, I’ve wondered what happened to the Sukais and their families during the Second World War, and how Mrs. Sukai’s family, the Hirosakis, managed to hold on to their home. Just two months after the Sukais’ house was reconstructed in Gilroy, Japan attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor. When the U.S. declared war against Japan, life for this country’s 120,000 Japanese Americans became very difficult. So all Japanese men and Japanese Americans, ones who were born here as well, were considered to be aliens. Aliens. Japanese American men, often with their entire families, were forcibly relocated into internment camps throughout the west. How did your family feel at that point?

Sukai: Well, they were worried because all the fellows were being taken by the FBI. We were all disturbed and didn’t know what to do, what to think. Dad was, I guess, wondering when he would be taken away, so every day was frightening. Eventually, they came after him, the first part of February, and the FBI with a policeman from Gilroy, and they took him away, shipped him to Bismarck, North Dakota. And at that time they gave us a week or so to get out on our -- voluntarily. We -- with -- my mother with eight children decided they would purchase a home in Grand Junction, Colorado. So when they gave us a notice, we left here. I think it was harder on my mother than the children. She survived. She was a strong person, I guess, but she -- but I think in her heart she was worried all the time.

Gwen: Mr. Sukai’s wartime story is equally complex. Like other Japanese Americans, he was initially shunned by the U.S. Military. Given the opportunity in March of 1943, we volunteered and formed the 442nd. And that’s a great story, but we had to do it. Mr. Sukai became a sergeant in the 442nd, the only all-Japanese American regiment and the most decorated.

Sukai: It’s a good part of history because we were really cast out by the United States military, and then when we had the opportunity to go in, we did so, and I think we earned our rights there.

Gwen: During the war, the land and property of many Japanese Americans was illegally seized, and for some it proved impossible to get it back. So how did the Sukais hold on to their house? It was all boarded up and no one disturbed it. I’ve heard that many houses were vandalized or torn down. But nothing like that happened here, to this house. They thought this house was a shrine or something. The workers never disturbed it.

Gwen: When did you come back to the house after the war?

Sukai: We were allowed to come back in March of 1945. Dad came home first. By the time I came home, dad had already cleaned up the yard and the house was all cleaned up and back to order. And for almost 60
years, this lovely house has been the home of an expanding and thriving American family. I look in the mirror and I don’t see a Japanese. I see an American.