Japanese Americans:
947 F Street, Fresno, California • 1915

The Maruko Cyclery

Map:
Fresno China-Japantown 1941

947 F Street, Fresno, California • 1915

Japanese Americans:
Maruko Cyclery

Map:
Fresno China-Japantown 1941
In a world of uncertain possibilities, Sanichi Uyemaruko decided to ride a bicycle.

But success in the new world would only come after he moved from Japan to San Francisco sometime after 1907. He worked at a restaurant to pay for his room and went to school to learn English.

Why he didn’t stay in San Francisco is not known, but Japanese were being encouraged to live in Fresno at this time, mostly to farm. Sometime around 1912 or 1913, he moved there and tried farming for two years but it did not pan out.

Then Sanichi started a new business by taking over one that was already established, buying Joe Nakamura’s cyclery in a handshake deal, said son Eiji Maruko in a 2019 interview.

China/Japantown would soon become a bustling community, filled with Italians, Chinese, Germans, Russians, Mexicans, Japanese and more.

“Chinatown was the hub of Fresno before it got started, look at how many nationalities were there.” said Sanichi’s grandson, Warren Maruko.

“That store was famous for kids to hang out,” said Keiko Maruko, Eiji’s wife. “Parents would call the store and ask ‘Is my son is there?’ ‘Yes, he’s here.’ Oh, then that’s fine.”
At some point, Sanichi changed his last name.

“Uyemaruko is very hard for caucasians to pronounce,” said Eiji. “So going through school we used Maruko (Mah-ruko), for easier pronunciation. They can’t get the U-Y-E.”

His first name would not change, however. He was one of three children, and the only boy.

San (sahn) means three and Ichi (e-chee) means one.
An early button denotes the ownership of the Nakamura Cyclery by S. Maruko. Hudsons were made in England; Columbia was the first American made bicycle. The button is about 3 inches across.
This 1915 photo depicts Sanichi, second from the right. The cash register still sports the name of the previous owner, Joe Nakamura.

Nakamura returned to Japan sometime after selling the store to Maruko. Perhaps Nakamura gave up on his dreams in America, giving Sanichi his chance.

Note the stack of wooden wheel rims on the top shelf. Steel rims were also available at this time.
Bicycle/Motorcycle seats (they were the same at this time). The paper wrapping was used to protect the seat.

Liquid Veneer was used to polish wood.

Oil cans w/spigot

Handlebar bells

New Departures was first known for guns, then bicycles, then motorcycles. The cutout emblem is a symbol for the first coaster brake, invented for bicycles circa 1890s.

Sanichi Maruko
Sanichi stands in the center of each photo in this 1915 stereo card, which creates the illusion of 3D with a stereo viewer.
Stationary from the 1930s explains that Maruko’s store had expanded and sold much more than bicycles, as does the badge, which dates from the second location of the store at 1153 F Street.

The *Fresno Herald* newspaper ad from the original location is from August 18, 1920.
Seen from the same side of F street as his original store is Sanichi Maruko and an unknown child who happened to be on the street. Across the street to the right side is the Oak Mar dry goods store. The cross street is Tulare.

This January 1932 photograph was likely shot by professional photographer George Hishida, whose business was just a few doors down from Sanichi’s. Hishida would have been standing right in front of his own storefront to make this image. For modern reference, Kogetsu-Do manju shop is on the same side of the street as Oak Mar and out of sight to the right (see map page 1).

The horizontal lines just behind Sanichi are the F Street trolley car tracks. The Fresno Traction Company operated trolleys in Fresno until 1939.

Records indicate that it snowed in Fresno on January 12-14, 1932. A rare event, perhaps Hishida wanted a subject to photograph in the snow, and Sanichi obliged him, despite not wearing any cold weather clothing.
Sanichi’s eldest son, Kenji, recalled that the customers were often Italian, because his family lived close to an Italian district. Immigrants dominated the area known then as the Westside, or Chinatown.

Many customers were farm workers who did not own a car. “Dad (Sanichi) used to tell me that some of the farm laborers would ride their bicycles out towards Hanford, which was another 30 miles,” Kenji said. “They would ride out in the dark and they would prune the (grape) vines. When it’s dark, they’d ride back, and they were paid a dollar a day back then in 1915.”

Sanichi’s business flourished with the immigrant labor nearby and he stayed open late to accommodate his customers.
“They'd come in, a lot of 'em, they'd have a flat tire,” Kenji recalled. “And back then, they didn't have the tools to fix the flat tires. So my dad would stay open late and the Italians would come in and they'd say, ‘Hey, Maruk, I got a flat tire. I got to go to work tomorrow, can I get it fixed?’”

“He would charge them 15 cents for the brass plugs, and the rubber plugs were 10 cents. But that was big money then,” Kenji continued. “And the bicycles, the rims were made out of wood, and the tires, we had to glue the tires onto the rims. And then if you didn't let the glue dry, the stem would bend, so you had to buy another tire.” The glue dried in 24 hours.

Sanichi’s youngest son, Eiji, eventually worked at the cyclery. Sanichi was good at truing wheels so they rolled correctly. “That was an art. I tried to do it,” Eiji laughed. “He never taught me.”
World War II upended the lives of Japanese on the West coast of America. “With the stroke of a pen, Executive Order 9066 made us American citizens, the Japanese, into 4C enemy aliens,” Kenji said. “We were born in the states, being classified as enemy aliens.”

The Maruko family and hundreds of Japanese in Fresno were forcibly relocated to the Fresno Assembly Center at the County fairgrounds for a few months under terrible conditions.

The Japanese immediately tried to normalize their lives. “We had Saturday night dances on Butler Avenue,” Kenji recalled. “Had the water truck come out and wash the street.”

“We had a local band that played Glenn Miller music, that was one of the highlights.”
1. Give advice and instructions on the evacuation.
2. Provide services with respect to the management, leasing, sale, storage or other disposition of most kinds of property, such as real estate, business and professional equipment, household goods, boats, automobiles and livestock.
3. Provide temporary residence elsewhere for all Japanese in family groups.
4. Transport persons and a limited amount of clothing and equipment to their

The Following Instructions Must Be Observed:

1. A responsible member of each family, preferably the head of the family, or the property is held, and each individual living alone, will report to the Civil Cor instructions. This must be done between 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. on Saturday, May and 5:00 P.M. on Sunday, May 17, 1942.

2. Evacuees must carry with them on departure for the Assembly Center, the following:
   (a) Bedding and linens (no mattress) for each member of the family;
   (b) Toilet articles for each member of the family;
   (c) Extra clothing for each member of the family;
   (d) Essential personal effects for each member of the family.

All items carried will be securely packaged, tied and plainly marked with the name of the owner in accordance with instructions obtained at the Civil Control Station. The size and weight limited to that which can be carried by the individual or family group.

3. No pets of any kind will be permitted.
4. No personal items and no household goods will be shipped to the Assembly Center.
5. The United States Government through its agencies will provide for the storage of the more substantial household items, such as iceboxes, washing machines, pianos, and other large or bulky items which are not to be shipped to the Assembly Center. Cooking utensils and other small items will be accepted for storage if crated, packed and labeled with the owner's name and address of the owner. Only one name and address will be used by a given family.
6. Each family, and individual living alone, will be furnished transportation to means of transportation will not be utilized. All instructions pertaining to the movement of people and goods shall be done at the Civil Control Station.

Close the Civil Control Station between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M.
Then they were sent to an Arkansas internment camp. “I was in Rohwer concentration camp, fighting for my rights,” said Kenji.

“That summer was hot, walking down the street, you kind of pass out. The heat and the humidity were so bad.”
The war ended in 1945 and around 1947, the store reopened and moved down the street to 1153 F Street, pictured here in September 1962.

“Somebody ran it during the war,” Eiji said. “So when we came back, we had the store. They didn’t think the war was going to last that long.”

“After the war we didn’t have a place to live, so we lived in back of the store.”

Thieves celebrated the new year by robbing the new location of pistols in late December, 1957. “They were displayed in front of the window,” Eiji said. “They just broke the window.”

After that, guns were removed from the front window display at the end of each business day and hidden from sight.

Sanichi originally stocked BB guns, because his farming customers complained “The birds would come to eat my grapes.” Eventually larger caliber guns were also sold.
Kenji Maruko, center, works in the hobby section at 1153 F Street. At right is his father, Sanichi. Unseen are wind up toys.
In the early 1960s, Kenji realized that the days of a department and sporting goods store were numbered. Competing stores in Fresno were taking business away from him. “That’s why dad got into the Honda dealership, Kenji’s son, Warren said. “Department stores are starting to come in, the timing was right.” Already in contact with Honda, Kenji then received a postcard from Honda asking if he wanted to be a dealer. “If you want to become a dealer, fill it out,” the postcard stated. It was that simple. Warren said, “When dad (Kenji) got the Honda dealership he was still at the 1153 F street store, but the police would always hassle him for having motorcycles on the sidewalk.”
Kenji Maruko works on a Honda 50 motorcycle at 1153 F Street.

When the Hondas arrived for the first time, they were in a box, unassembled with no instructions.

Maruko put them together based on his knowledge of bicycles.
Advertisements for Japanese businesses in the downtown and China/Japantown area, circa 1950-60s.
Kenji Maruko moved the business to 2848 E. Belmont in 1969 and for a short time, he ran both stores. He owned the building, unlike the F Street stores.

In 1988 he sold the business and it became Fresno Honda.
Kenji Maruko
Sanichi Maruko
Mikiye Maruko

Shuji Maruko
Eiji Maruko
Kou Maruko, Sanichi’s wife
Sachiye Maruko

1937
In May 1872, Edward H. Mix plotted the new town of Fresno in a classic grid. Blocks measured 320 by 400 feet with 20-foot alleys, and lots ranged from 25 to 150 feet. In 1873 a meeting was held and the result was Whites selected the east side of the railroad tracks and relegated other ethnicities and disreputables to the west side. The new town incorporated in 1885. The term “Westside,” has been used to mean Chinatown since then.

Seen here is Sanichi Maruko’s cycley on the “Westside” of the F Street Trolley car line, of Nori Masuda’s 1890 to 1930 map of China/Japantown. The railroad tracks are unseen to the east (right), between G & H streets. A number of Asian businesses were located on the east side as well.
A man walks across the railroad tracks and dirt that divided east and west Fresno beginning in 1873.

He is facing what is left of China/Japantown.

The high speed rail will soon run through this corridor.

As of 2019, only two Japanese businesses remain on the Westside; Central Fish and Kogetsu-Do manju shop.
Sanichi Uyaruko in 1915, and more than 114 years later, what the High Speed Rail might look like when/if finished. The HSR will not be as close to G Street as shown in this composite.

• Quotes from Kenji Maruko, who died on June 23, 2014, are courtesy of a video interview from Densho.org and an audio recording made at Edison High School.

• Warren Maruko, Eiji Maruko and his wife, Keiko, were interviewed in Fresno, CA • January-February 2019

• Special thanks to Patricia Maruko and Nick Dounias for additional information.

• All historic photos courtesy of the Maruko family.

• The map on page 1 was produced by Norman P. Abe. The map on this and the previous page was produced by Nori Masuda. Both came from the Fresno County Library Heritage Center.

1 Source: Kevin Enns-Rempel of Historicfresno.org


• Produced by Brad Shirakawa • February 24, 2019 • v4