Before the brave, before the proud builders and workers,
I say I want the wide American earth
For all the free.

I want the wide American earth for my people.
I want my beautiful land.
I want it with my rippling strength and tenderness
Of love and light and truth
For all the free.

Carlos Bulosan (1913–1956), Filipino American laborer, activist, poet
Building Railroads
Cultivating the Land

In the 1860s, Chinese immigrant workers built much of the treacherous Central Pacific stretch of the Transcontinental Railroad, making up over 80% of the workforce. They set records for track-laying speed while tunneling deep underground and setting explosives in high mountain peaks. Many lost their lives in these treacherous conditions, and there was harsh inequity in their wages. But through the workers’ incredible diligence and industry, the line was completed in 1869, seven years ahead of schedule.

Asian immigrants also played a major role in the development of agriculture in America. In California, thousands of Asian tenant farmers cultivated fruit, vegetables, flowers, and poultry; in Washington, many were fishermen and worked in canneries. In Hawai‘i, between 1850 and 1930, more than 200,000 Japanese, 112,000 Filipino, 7,000 Korean, and nearly 50,000 Chinese laborers worked the plantations and played a major role in the agricultural industry. When Hawai‘i joined the U.S. in 1959, it was the first and only state with a predominantly Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander population.
For decades, “Asian in America” was not the same as “Asian American.” By the late 19th century, there was still no clear path to citizenship for the 110,000 Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants living in the United States. Only “free white persons and persons of African descent” could become naturalized citizens. New immigration was highly restricted. The Page Act of 1875 barred female Asians from entering the country, and in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act effectively halted all Chinese immigration. It was not repealed until the passage of the Magnuson Act in 1943.

Even those born in the country could be denied citizenship rights. In 1894, on his way home from a brief visit to China, 21-year-old, California-born Wong Kim Ark was denied entry to the United States. As a native-born citizen, he claimed the right to return, and took his fight all the way to the Supreme Court. A landmark 1898 decision went in Wong’s favor, ruling that the Constitution clearly states that anyone born in the U.S., even a child of undocumented parents, is a citizen of the United States. Over the decades, this decision has become one of the most critical in our nation’s history in affirming an expansive definition of what it means to be a U.S. citizen.
The harshest example of America’s abiding perception of Asians as aliens came in 1942, with the country engulfed in World War II. Japan’s attack on Hawai’i’s Pearl Harbor triggered suspicion that Japanese Americans were a threat to the nation’s security. President Roosevelt authorized removal of “any or all persons” judged to be a potential security threat, and built ten “internment camps” to imprison nearly 120,000 people of Japanese descent for the next three years. Ultimately, not a single Japanese American was ever found guilty of espionage.

Despite the incarceration of their families and friends, and despite classification as “enemy aliens,” more than 14,000 Japanese Americans, along with Native Hawaiians and Korean Americans, chose to serve their country during World War II, joining the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and the Military Intelligence Service. The 442nd became the most decorated unit in the history of the U.S. military. Many soldiers, including Senator Daniel K. Inouye (1924–2012), who served in Congress for 53 years, would return home and dedicate themselves to public service.

I Want the Wide American Earth: An Asian Pacific American Story was created by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibition is supported by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
Asian American Activism

The fight for fair labor practices and civil rights has long united Asian Pacific Americans with working-class African Americans, Latinos, and white Americans. For instance, the Delano Grape Strike of 1965 brought together Filipino and Mexican American labor organizers, including Larry Itliong and César Chávez, and led to a successful nationwide grape boycott and the birth of the highly influential United Farm Workers.

Asian Pacific American community organizing took another important step in the early 1980s, when 27-year old Chinese American Vincent Chin was beaten to death near Detroit, Michigan, by two local autoworkers angry about the rise of Japan’s auto industry. The perpetrators, who believed Chin to be Japanese, served no jail time. The case became a rallying point for Asian Pacific American communities across the country, and their efforts triggered a federal prosecution. Vincent Chin’s murder is considered the beginning of a widespread pan-ethnic Asian Pacific American movement.
In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act opened up new waves of immigration, dramatically changing the demographic makeup of America and its cultural landscape. Asian Pacific America in particular was transformed, with over seven million new Asian immigrants arriving between 1971 and 2002 and settling all across the country. Today, the Asian and Pacific Islander population in the United States is the nation’s fastest growing major race group. Between 2000 and 2010, the population increased by 46%, to an estimated 17.3 million, or 5.6% of the total population.

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“If home is found on both sides of the globe, home is of course here—and always a missed land.”

Asian immigrant cooking began transforming the American palate as early as the Gold Rush. Today, high-end Asian fusion restaurants permeate the gourmet dining scene. Chinese takeout, Japanese sushi and ramen counters, Indian buffets, Vietnamese pho houses, and Korean BBQs are staples throughout the U.S., vital as both family businesses and the public face of Asian Pacific America.

But these food cultures stretch beyond restaurants, from farmlands to home kitchens, from shrimp boats to places of worship. Stories of Asian Pacific American foodways are about preservation, adaptation, and ingenuity—stories of passing along and continually reinventing cultural identity.

Photograph by Doris Truong

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Part of the historical fabric of America, Asian Pacific Americans are also pointing us to its future, serving as pioneers in numerous fields—from literature to science; cutting edge technology to cutting edge fashion; and the big screen to the world stage.

Despite these remarkable advances, challenges remain. The myth of Asian Pacific Americans as a “model minority” conceals the real educational, economic, and health disparities that these communities face today.

Asian Pacific Americans have been a part of every chapter in this country’s great chronicle—building bridges, toppling barriers, imagining communities—shaping the arc of our nation’s history and pointing the way to its future, ever seeking the Wide American Earth.