

Cultural News



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About Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month

APA Heritage Month was first established in 1977 when Representatives Frank Horton and Norman Mineta and Senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga introduced resolutions asking the President to declare the first ten days of May (the month when the first Japanese immigrants arrived in the U.S. in 1843) as Asian/Pacific Heritage Week. In 1978 President Carter made it an annual event and in 1990, President George H.W. Bush proclaimed the entire month of May to be Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

Asian Americans and non-Asians usually celebrate by eating at Asian restaurants or attending one of the numerous APA Heritage festivals or parades organized each May by Asian American community organizations, where they can taste the different foods from various Asian countries, watch cultural performances, and learn more about Asian American history and culture.

Let there be no doubt that these kinds of celebrations are wonderful, fun, and highly recommended. At the same time, we should also keep in mind what it is we're really celebrating. In other words, what does it mean to be proud of one's Asian American heritage?

Chinese Festival Lanterns © Keren Su/Corbis

For me, celebrating my APA heritage means lots of things. First, I am proud that the history of my ancestors goes back 20 generations -- twice as long as the U.S. has even existed. The point is that I feel very fortunate to have two sets of cultures to enjoy -- American and Vietnamese. Rather than divide my identity in half, these two sets of experiences double my understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the world around me.

Second, I'm proud to share in the accomplishments of all Asian Americans before me. That includes those who are well-known and famous who worked to shatter the old myths and stereotypes against us, like Bruce Lee, members of the 442nd Regimental Unit in World War II, and Maxine Hong Kingston -- and those who remain relatively obscure in the realms of history but whose accomplishments are no less impressive and inspiring. These include the Chinese miners who died building the Transcontinental Railroad, the Japanese Americans who endured their illegal imprisonment during World War II, and everyday Asian immigrant families who work tirelessly to improve their lives and build a future for their children.

Finally, I memorialize the sacrifices and suffering that many Asian Americans went through so that our community could unite and fight for their justice -- heroes such as Fred Korematsu and Vincent Chin. May their legacy serve to inspire us for generations to come and may the lives of all those before me serve to illustrate the diversity and beauty of what it means to be Asian American.

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MAY 2015 CALENDAR

GLOBAL HEALTH AND FITNESS MONTH
JEWISH-AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH
NATIONAL MILITARY APPRECIATION MONTH
ASIAN AMERICAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER HERITAGE MONTH

- 1 - Beltane - Samhain (Wicca/Pagan)
- 2 - Twelfth Day of Ridvan (Baha'i)
- 3-9 - Children's Mental Health Week (US)
- 4 - Visakha Puja (Buddhist)
- 5 - Cinco de Mayo (International)
- 6-12 - National Nurses Day and Week (US)
- 8 - World Red Cross (World)
- 7 - Lag B'Omer (Jewish)
- 10 - Mother's Day (International)
- 11-17 - Salvation Army Week (US)
- 13 - Lailat al Miraj (Islam)
- 14 - Buddah Day (Buddhist)
- 15 - National Tuberosis Sclerosis Day (US)
- 17-23 - Emergency Medical Services Week
- 24 - Pentecost (Western Christian)
- 24-30 - Hurricane Preparedness Week
- 29 - Ascension of Baha'u'llah (Baha'i)
- 31 - Pentecost (Eastern Christian)



Cinco de Mayo

During the French-Mexican War, a poorly supplied and outnumbered Mexican army under General Ignacio Zaragoza defeats a French army attempting to capture Puebla de Los Angeles, a small town in east-central Mexico. Victory at the Battle of Puebla represented a great moral victory for the Mexican government, symbolizing the country's ability to defend its sovereignty against threat by a powerful foreign nation.

In 1861, the liberal Mexican Benito Juarez became president of a country in financial ruin, and he was forced to default on his debts to European governments. In response, France, Britain, and Spain sent naval forces to Veracruz to demand reimbursement.

Britain and Spain negotiated with Mexico and withdrew, but France, ruled by Napoleon III, decided to use the opportunity to carve a dependent empire out of Mexican territory. Late in 1861, a well-armed French fleet stormed Veracruz, landing a large French force and driving President Juarez and his government into retreat.

Certain that French victory would come swiftly in Mexico, 6,000 French troops under General Charles Latrille de Lorencez set out to attack Puebla de Los Angeles. From his new headquarters in the north, Juarez rounded up a rag-tag force of loyal men and sent them to Puebla. Led by Texas-born General Zaragoza, the 2,000 Mexicans fortified the town and prepared for the French assault. On the fifth of May, 1862, Lorencez drew his army, well-provisioned and supported by heavy artillery, before the city of Puebla and began their assault from the north. The battle lasted from daybreak to early evening, and when the French finally retreated they had lost nearly 500 soldiers to the fewer than 100 Mexicans killed.

Although not a major strategic victory in the overall war against the French, Zaragoza's victory at Puebla tightened Mexican resistance, and six years later France withdrew. The same year, Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, who had been installed as emperor of Mexico by Napoleon in 1864, was captured and executed by Juarez' forces. Puebla de Los Angeles, the site of Zaragoza's historic victory, was renamed Puebla de Zaragoza in honor of the general. Today, Mexicans celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla as Cinco de Mayo, a national holiday in Mexico.

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/cinco-de-mayo>

Vesak Festival or Buddha Day

The Vesak festival, or Buddha Day, celebrates three major events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, Enlightenment and passing away on the full moon of the 6th lunar month (May). It is the most important festival in the Buddhist lunar calendar.

Buddhist festivals are a time for joy. They give Buddhists an opportunity to meet together, to take the Three Refuges and learn more about the Buddha's teachings. Families bring food, candles and flowers to the monks in the monasteries. In return, the monks chant the scriptures, lead a period of meditation and give teachings on the themes of the festival.

There is a party feel to the whole occasion. Houses and streets are cleaned and decorated with Buddhist flags and flowers. In villages, Buddhists gather around statues of the Buddha when it is dark. They walk around the statue with candles till all is covered in light.

During the Vesak celebration, an image of the new-born Buddha - in the gesture of pointing to the Truth - is usually displayed in the shrine room.

Buddhists use light (candles, butter lamps) to celebrate Vesak to recall that the Buddha showed people how to become enlightened. Why do you think lights are such a powerful symbol?

Buddhist Flag:

The first five stripes of the flag are in five colours. The sixth colour is a conglomeration of the other five, but for the design, it has been separated into its constituent colours.

The Buddhist flag is a modern creation but it has come to symbolize the

unity of Buddhists. It is now used worldwide in nearly sixty countries during Buddhist festivals, particularly during the Vesak celebrations.



The Bodhi Tree

The tree the Buddha attained Enlightenment under, in Bodhi Gaya, India, is called the bodhi tree. It is greatly revered in Buddhism. A bodhi tree can usually be found in the grounds of most temples or monasteries, and is decorated with flags, lamps and lanterns for the Vesak celebration.

It is a custom in Buddhist countries to paint on leaves from a bodhi tree, usually a picture of the Buddha, to give as gifts on Vesak day.



<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/>