“A KOREAN AMERICAN CENTURY” PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION OPENS AT THE SMITHSONIAN

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History is celebrating the centennial of Korean immigration (1903-2003) to the United States with the new exhibition “A Korean American Century.” This comprehensive display of photographs covers the span of more than one hundred years from the late 19th century to the present day. It focuses on the historic events affecting Korean immigration, and on the achievements of Korean Americans. The exhibition opens Jan. 22 and closes June 8.

“A Korean American Century” was organized by the museum’s Asian Cultural History Program with support from the Embassy of the Republic of Korea. The historic and archival photos on display come from contributors in the United States and Korea.

This exhibition traces the relationship between Korea and the United States during the past century. It explores the heritage of nearly 1 million Korean Americans that presently reside in the United States through a backdrop of events such as early diplomatic contact between the United States and Korea, the Korean War, the division of Korea, and the Los Angeles riots in 1992.

“Korean Americans have made great contributions both to America and to Korea,” said Dr. Paul Michael Taylor, director of the museum’s Asian Cultural History Program and co-curator of the exhibition with Chang-su Cho Houchins, East Asian specialist within the Program. Taylor continued, “Korean Americans also struggled for Korea's independence and more recently have helped Korea's globalization and democratization. This exhibition visually summarizes a century of Korean American migrations, struggles and contributions to both countries, within a broad historic context.”
A century ago, the first Korean immigrants left their homeland for Hawaii in January 1903. They were to become workers in the sugarcane plantations. Since these first workers were mostly men, picture brides -- wives found through exchange of photographs with women in Korea -- became a source of marriages and families. Forty percent of these early immigrants were already Christian before their arrival on U.S. soil, and American missionaries played an important role in facilitating their passage to America. Korean immigration spread from Hawaii to the continental U.S. The exhibition also explores changes and growth in Korean immigration to the United States since that time.

“A Korean American Century” features 56 historic and archival photos. Some of the earliest images are of 19th century Korea, including a portrait of King Kojong and a ceremony marking the first electric streetcar in Seoul. Other photographs depict early Korean immigrants to America. Included in this section of the exhibition are images of a Korean Christian Church in Honolulu, and early Korean American leaders and activists for Korea’s independence.

Contemporary photos cover an array of topics from the Korean War and the subsequent division of the country to current initiatives for reconciliation between North and South. Also represented are the artistic and social contributions made by present-day Korean Americans.

**Exhibition Highlights**

- Photographs from Korean American private collections, exhibited for the first time
- Rare, historic photographs of 19th and early 20th-century Korea
- Rare photographs of the Korean American struggle for Korea’s independence from Japan, including early independence activists, a 1920s Korean military training camp in Nebraska, and successful community efforts to distinguish Koreans (who were then Japanese citizens) from Japanese, who were interned as enemy aliens during World War II
- Contemporary photographs depicting current Korean American achievements, and related issues (such as family reunification efforts) in the two Koreas

A free film will be presented in conjunction with the exhibition. “Wedding through Camera Eyes: A Trilogy of Wedding Photography in Korea” will be screened in Baird auditorium on Saturday, Jan. 25 and Sunday, Jan. 26, at 1 p.m. In the film, anthropologist Kijung Lee shows how wedding albums turn ordinary couples into heroes and heroines.
The Asian Cultural History Program is a privately supported program to study Asian cultures, preserve and expand the museum’s Asian collections, and display facets of these cultural traditions for the public. It encompasses a variety of research and outreach projects devoted to particular regions: the Korean Heritage Project, the Heritage of Thailand Project, the Sikh Heritage Project, the Philippine Project, the Taiwan Project, and the Papua (Irian Jaya) Project. Each of these is supported by donations from individuals, Asian American and other organizations, and corporations.

The National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., welcomed more than 6 million people during 2002, making it the most visited natural history museum in the world. Opened in 1910, the Museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world's most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. It also fosters critical scientific research as well as educational programs and exhibitions that present the work of its scientists and curators to the public. The Museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research complex. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day. Admission is free.

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**NOTE TO EDITORS:** Images are available upon request.

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