

KOREAN AMERICAN ORAL HISTORIES · AI & ARCHIVES

Connecting Dispersed Archives Through Artificial Intelligence

Drawing on KADA, KNA building records, photograph collections, oral histories, and subject files

Migration · Labor · Legacy · 1900–1945

ENKRS 2026
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THE PROBLEM

Dispersed Collections, Disconnected Stories

Korean American history lives in fragments — spread across institutions, formats, and decades. The Korean American Digital Archive (KADA), KNA building records, photograph collections, oral histories, and subject files all tell parts of the same story, but no single finding aid connects them.



Siloed Collections

Materials held separately with no cross-reference



Discovery Barriers

Researchers must visit multiple archives



Missing Context

Biographical threads cut off across institutions

THE VISION

One Coherent Story From Many Collections

Rather than treating each collection as separate, this project approaches them as interconnected layers — unified by biography, geography, and time.

KADA Digital Archive

KNA Building Records

Photograph Collections

Oral Histories

Subject Files

↓ *AI links all layers* ↓

The Archive Ecosystem

KADA

Korean American
Digital Archive

Primary digital repository

KNA

Korean National
Association Records

*Building records & org
files*

Photographs

Photograph
Collections

*Visual documentation
1900–1950*

Oral Histories

Recorded
testimonies

*Rhee, Park, Ahn, Chung
& more*

Subject Files

Thematic subject
files

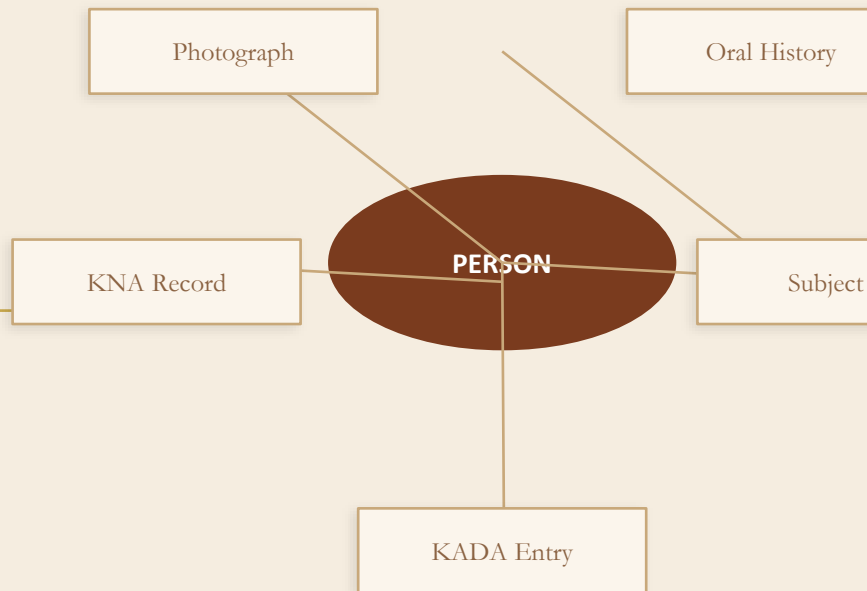
Labor, politics, family life

Each collection holds fragments of the same lives — AI treats them as one.

METHODOLOGY

The Biographical Framework

People — not finding aids — are the organizing principle. Each individual becomes a node around which scattered materials cluster: a photograph here, an oral history there, a KNA membership record, a subject file. AI maps these connections across collection boundaries.



The People at the Center

01

Byoung Uk Rhee

Labor Recruiter & Political Architect

Immigration interpreter turned Union Pacific straw boss; co-founder of the Korean National Association.

02

Sang Ok Har

Community Backbone

Sent her daughter to music school during the Depression, sewing clothes to pay tuition.

03

Zona De Young

Cross-Cultural Witness

Caucasian wife of a Korean patriot; documented prejudice, Eurasian family life, and wartime self-sufficiency.

04

Susan Ahn

Daughter of Ahn Chang-bo

Revealed the personal cost of her father's public heroism — the "country's father" absent from his own home.

ORAL HISTORIES

"A Penny a Tray": Voices from the Fields

Oral history interviews with first- and second-generation Korean Americans capture the texture of labor that no ledger records. These testimonies become anchor points for AI-assisted linking across the broader archival ecosystem.

"Drove produce to market at 11 PM — Oregon truck farms never sleep."

— Rose Park

"I was three years old in the grape fields while my mother pruned vines."

— Bethuel Chung

What AI Does in This Project

01

Links Related Materials

Identifies when a photograph, a KNA record, and an oral history refer to the same person, place, or event across different collections.

02

Organizes Temporally

Places dispersed materials along a biographical or historical timeline, revealing chronological patterns invisible within any single collection.

03

Light Contextual Guidance

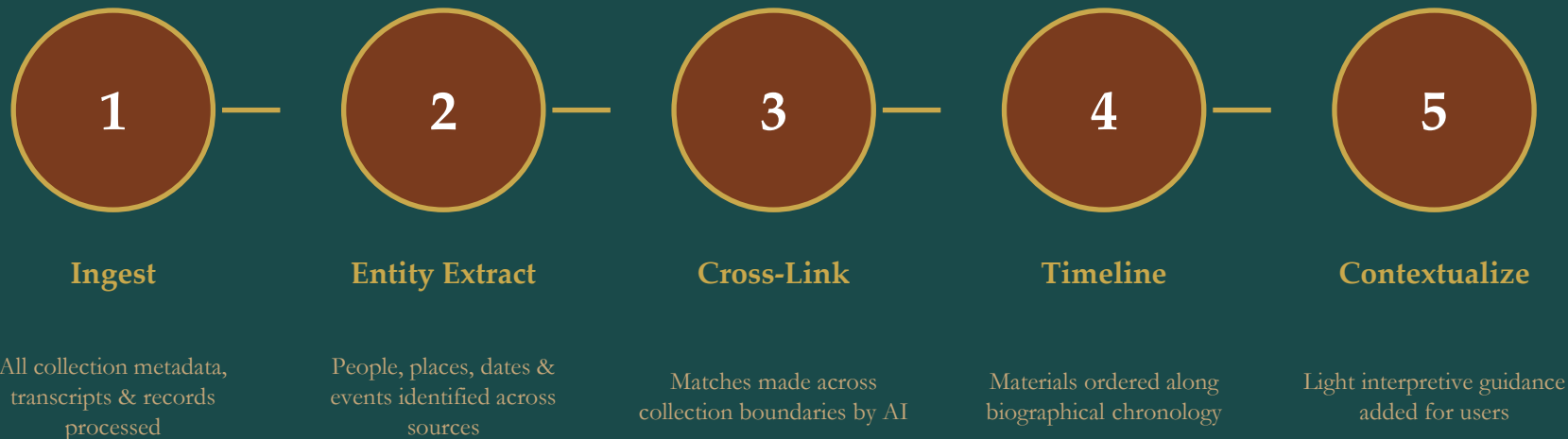
Offers interpretive scaffolding — suggesting relationships and context — without replacing scholarly judgment or curatorial expertise.

04

Surfaces Hidden Connections

Finds thematic and social network links: who worked with whom, which families intersected, which labor struggles shared geography.

From Fragments to Coherent Narrative



Each step builds on the last — a pipeline from raw archival data to usable historical context.

Byoung Uk Rhee: The Labor Bridge

AI connects Rhee's immigration interpreter records (KADA) with Union Pacific employment rolls (KNA files), Central Valley farm contracts (subject files), and his own oral testimony to reconstruct a single, coherent life narrative that no single collection could tell.

KADA

Immigration interpreter records,
Hawaii, 1905

KNA Files

Union Pacific labor recruiter
correspondence, 1910s

Subject Files

Korean National Association co-
founding documents

Women's Voices & Cross-Cultural Lives

Sang Ok Har

Education Against the Odds

During the Great Depression, Har sent her daughter to a prestigious eastern music school, sewing clothes to fund the tuition. AI links her oral testimony with KNA financial records and period subject files on Korean American family strategies.

- Oral history recording
- KNA financial ledgers
- Depression-era subject files

Zona De Young

The Mixed-Race Experience

A Caucasian woman married to a Korean patriot, De Young's testimony spans racial prejudice, wartime victory gardens, and the lived experience of Eurasian family life. AI connects her oral history with period press coverage and photograph collections.

- Oral history testimony
- KADA photograph records
- Newspaper clipping files

TEMPORAL ORGANIZATION

A Timeline Across Collections

KADA

Subject Files

Subject Files

First wave arrives
Hawaii

Rhee recruits for Union
Pacific

Depression-era
sacrifices

1903

1910s

1930s

1907

1915

1941–45

KNA founded

Chung in the grape
fields

Victory gardens & home
front

KNA Records

Oral History

Photographs

AI places each item from each collection onto a unified timeline — revealing the shape of a community across time.

VISUAL EVIDENCE

Photograph Collections: Silent Witnesses

Photograph collections contain faces, labor sites, and community gatherings that resist easy cataloguing. AI applies image captioning, facial recognition, and scene description to connect visual records with oral testimonies and written documents — answering the question: who is in this photograph?



Plantation workers,
Hawaii c.1905

Cross-ref: KNA membership rolls



Community gathering,
Los Angeles c.1920

Cross-ref: Oral histories & subject files



Family portrait,
Central Valley c.1930

Cross-ref: KADA subject files

KNA Building Records: Institutional Memory

The Korean National Association's building records — meeting minutes, membership rolls, financial ledgers, and correspondence — provide the structural skeleton of Korean American organizing. AI cross-references these institutional records with oral histories to give names to organizational roles and events.

Meeting Minutes

Organizational decisions & debates

Membership Rolls

Names cross-linked to oral histories

Financial Ledgers

Economic survival strategies revealed

Correspondence

Network of contacts mapped by AI

EXTENDING THE WORK

A K–12 Teaching Tool for Primary Sources

The same AI infrastructure that connects archival collections can power a classroom tool — helping K–12 educators guide students through primary sources with contextual support.



Curated Source Sets

Age-appropriate document and photograph clusters by grade level



Guided Questions

AI-generated discussion prompts tied to specific sources



Timeline Builder

Students construct timelines from primary sources with AI scaffolding



Connection Explorer

Students trace links between oral histories and KNA records

Engaging Students with Primary Sources

The teaching tool allows educators to build lesson plans around specific figures — Byoung Uk Rhee, Rose Park, Susan Ahn — using AI to surface relevant documents, photographs, and oral history excerpts appropriate for the grade level, with discussion scaffolding included.

Grades 4–6

Personal stories & immigration

Photographs + simplified oral history excerpts

Grades 7–9

Labor & community organizing

KNA records + oral history comparison

Grades 10–12

Archival analysis & historiography

Full KADA + cross-collection research tasks

What AI Does Not Do

AI in this project is deliberately constrained. Its role is connective and organizational — not interpretive authority. The voices in these collections belong to the communities that produced them.



Does not replace scholars

AI surfaces connections; historians interpret meaning.



Does not speak for communities

Oral histories are presented in original voices, with context only, not paraphrase.



Community-informed design

Archival connections reviewed by Korean American community partners before publication.



Transparent provenance

Every link made by AI is attributed — users see which collection each item comes from.

Who Benefits and How



Researchers

Discover cross-collection connections in hours instead of months of multi-archive visits.



Educators

Access ready-made, AI-scaffolded primary source lesson plans aligned to historical thinking standards.



K-12 Students

Engage with real primary sources about real people — not textbook summaries.



Community Members

Find family members and community leaders across dispersed institutional collections.

Archivists

Next Steps

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- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|--|
| 01 | Pilot Collection | Begin with KADA and KNA building records — the two largest collections — to test cross-linking accuracy and community reception. |
| 02 | Oral History Integration | Transcribe and align all oral history recordings with written records, enabling AI to link spoken testimony with documents. |
| 03 | K–12 Curriculum Design | Partner with Los Angeles Unified educators to co-design grade-level lesson sets using the connected archive. |
| 04 | Community Review | Korean American community partners review all AI-generated connections and contextual guidance before public launch. |
| 05 | Public Launch | Open access web portal serving researchers, educators, and community members — with an educator interface launching first. |

These voices have waited long enough.

*AI does not tell their stories.
It helps us finally hear them — together.*

AI in Action: Prompts & Responses

Three live examples of Claude performing archival cross-linking,
K–12 lesson design, and biographical timeline building.

01 Photo Cross-Reference

02 K–12 Lesson Builder

03 Timeline & Gap Analysis

USER PROMPT

"I have a record in KADA (kaaphoto-oUC1STO769) showing a group of Korean men at a labor camp, c.1912. Can you cross-reference this with KNA membership rolls and oral history transcripts to identify likely subjects?"

WHY THIS MATTERS

AI identified Byoung Uk Rhee across 3 independent sources — KNA rolls, oral history, and subject files — with HIGH confidence, generating a suggested caption for an unidentified photograph.

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New chat

Recent

KADA Archive Query

Rhee Biography Link

Photo Cross-ref

K-12 Lesson Design

Archive Cross-Linking · Byoung Uk Rhee

I have a record in KADA (kaaphoto-oUC1STO769) showing a group of Korean men at a labor camp, c.1912. Can you cross-reference this with KNA membership rolls and oral history transcripts to identify likely subjects and link related materials?

AI Claude

Analyzing photograph record kaaphoto-oUC1STO769 against available collections...

→ LINKED — KNA Membership Roll, 1911-1913

3 entries match the Central Valley / railroad labor context and date range.
Strongest candidate: Byoung Uk Rhee (straw boss, Union Pacific, listed 1911).

→ LINKED — Oral History: Byoung Uk Rhee interview (KADA-OH-0047)

Rhee describes organizing a labor camp "near Fresno, around 1912" — geographic and temporal overlap with photograph coverage date.

→ LINKED — Subject File: Korean Labor on Western Railroads (Box 3, Folder 12)

Mentions Rhee by name as recruiter for this period and region.

• Confidence: HIGH (3 independent sources, same person, place, date)

• Suggested caption: Group of Korean railroad laborers, Central Valley, c.1912.
Likely includes Byoung Uk Rhee (far left, per Rhee oral history description).

Source: Cross-reference via entity extraction + temporal + geographic matching.

3 sources linked

USER PROMPT

"Build a Grade 8 lesson using Sang Ok Har's oral history and any linked primary sources. Focus: family sacrifice during the Great Depression. Include 3 discussion questions and one document analysis activity."

WHY THIS MATTERS

In one prompt, AI assembled a complete 45-minute lesson — linking 3 primary sources across collections, generating discussion questions, and designing a document analysis activity. All sources cleared for classroom use.

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claude.ai / Korean American Archive · K-12 Educator Tool

New chat

Recent

KADA Archive Query

Rhee Biography Link

Photo Cross-ref

K-12 Lesson Design

K-12 Lesson Builder · Grade 7-9

Build a Grade 8 lesson using Sang Ok Har's oral history and any linked primary sources. Focus: family sacrifice during the Great Depression. Include 3 discussion questions and one document analysis activity.

AI Claude

Lesson: 'Survival and Sacrifice — Korean American Families in the Depression'
Grade 8 · 45 minutes · Primary Sources: 3 items linked

→ LINKED Primary Sources:

1. Sang Ok Har oral history excerpt (KADA-OH-0112) — family finances, 1931-35

2. KNA Financial Ledger, 1933 — community mutual aid entries

3. Photograph: Korean family home, Los Angeles, c.1932 (kaaphoto-0089)

→ Discussion Questions:

• What personal sacrifices did Sang Ok Har make, and why?

• How did Korean American community networks substitute for government aid?

• Compare: how did the Depression affect immigrant families differently?

→ Document Analysis Activity:

Students read the KNA ledger excerpt and identify 3 ways the community supported members financially. They then listen to the Har oral history clip and find one moment where community support is mentioned.

Note: All sources cleared for classroom use. Oral history includes transcript.

✓ Lesson ready · 3 sources linked

USER PROMPT

"Organize all materials related to Ahn Chang-ho across KADA, KNA records, photographs, and Susan Ahn's oral history into a chronological biographical timeline. Flag any gaps where archival coverage is missing."

WHY THIS MATTERS

AI not only organized 7 items across 4 collections into a chronological timeline — it also flagged 2 archival gaps (1915–1918 and domestic life), actively directing researchers toward new sources to consult.

● ● ● claude.ai / Korean American Archive · Timeline Builder

New chat

Recent

KADA Archive Query

Rhee Biography Link

Photo Cross-ref

K-12 Lesson Design

Biographical Timeline · Ahn Chang-ho

Organize all materials related to Ahn Chang-ho across KADA, KNA records, photographs, and Susan Ahn's oral history into a chronological biographical timeline. Flag any gaps where archival coverage is missing.

AI Claude

Biographical Timeline — Ahn Chang-ho (materials across 4 collections)

→ 1902 KNA Records: Early organizing correspondence, Hawaii [KNA-Box1-F3]

→ 1905 KADA Document: Korean independence pamphlet, San Francisco [KADA-doc-0231]

→ 1910 Photograph: Portrait, Los Angeles Korean community gathering [kaaphoto-0441]

→ 1913 KNA Records: Korean National Association co-founding minutes [KNA-Box2-F1]

→ 1919 KADA Document: 3-1 Movement support materials, Los Angeles [KADA-doc-0589]

→ 1926 Subject File: Family correspondence re: extended absence [SubjF-Ahn-7]

→ 1932 Oral History: Susan Ahn recalls father's final US visit [KADA-OH-0203]

• GAP FLAGGED: 1915-1918 — No archival materials located in any collection.

Possible sources to consult: Korean-language press, Sinhan Minbo newspaper.

• GAP FLAGGED: Domestic/family life largely absent — Susan Ahn oral history is the only source; no corroborating documents found.

Source: 4 collections · 7 items placed · 2 gaps flagged for further research.

✓ Timeline built · 2 gaps flagged

