

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with RUTH KING

Interviewed

By

Sherry Turner

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NARRATOR: RUTH KING
INTERVIEWER: Sherry Turner
DATE: August 28, 1973
LOCATION: Klamath Falls, Oregon
PROJECT: Japanese American

ST: This is an interview with Ruth E. King for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Project, by Sherry Turner, Klamath Falls, Oregon, on August 28, at 1:30 P.M., 1973. Mrs. King, what was your occupation during the time you were working in connection with the camp?

RK: I was a newspaper correspondent for the *Klamath Falls Herald and News*, living at Merrill, Oregon.

ST: What sorts of things did you do in connection with your newspaper work for the camp?

RK: At that time, I did largely feature articles. And contacted the staff of the *Herald and News* by telephone almost daily, [and notified] of activities that I heard and understood were going on down at the camp.

ST: What were your sympathies at the time toward the camp, or toward the internees?

RK: Frankly, they were entirely sympathetic to the Japanese. I was in and out of the camp over a period of years, from the time that it started in mid-May 1942 until the camp was closed in November of 1945. I met many, many, many of those people down there, not socially, but I attended their functions. I attended some of their weddings, some of their funerals, Shinto and Buddhist; interviewed and talked to on a person-to-person basis with various families. I was present a number of times during the publication of their small Japanese American newspaper. And through them I met a number of young people from the universities and colleges of California.

ST: You mentioned that they had a paper out there. Do you know if they were restricted in what they printed in their paper?

RK: Not that I know of. Their reports were largely on births, marriages, deaths, recreational activities, churches, church activities, and they were announced through the newspaper

called the *Newell Star*. They were given information on the War Relocation Authority activities, and their restrictions, and their orders as to what they could do. They had motion picture theaters and they were also made aware of the programs. Their school news was published through the *Newell Star*. The news was gathered by both Japanese adults and young people, and it was published and mimeographed in a small building right there on the grounds.

ST: What conditions prevailed in the camp, living conditions?

RK: To the outsider, they were most primitive. The homes that I was in were barracks divided into three or four barracks of living quarters, I should say. When they came there, they were permitted by the Western Defense Command to bring only one extra set of clothing, their toilet articles, and some bedding but no mattresses. They were provided with cots. They were provided with very simple tables and chairs; many of them made other living accommodations themselves out of just anything that they could pick up around the camp.

During the years that I knew some of them, they made their own small gardens out of just whatever they could find in the camp. I saw one small Japanese garden made of five-gallon oil cans to hold the water, and they had made a waterfall out of some rocks that they had picked up. They had access to garden seeds, so they planted small flower gardens, and they used native materials to beautify their homes. For instance, the camp was located on the lake bottom of what, at one time, was Tule Lake, later drained by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for farm lands. And in this area, it was a pummy dust and sand. They retrieved, through digging and sifting the ground materials, minute shells, tiny shells. I don't know whether they were snail shells or what they were, but some of them were no larger than a woman's finger nail. With this material, they made jewelry; they made small household decorations, pictures, and they used nail polish and ordinary paints to color them. And they used what board material they could find to paint on. They painted Fujiyama, and they painted the surrounding territory. The peninsula, on which there is a cross, where I was told the Japanese went up to worship. There were Catholics and Protestants; there were Buddhists and Shintos.

Some of them were permitted to leave the camp and farm, to produce part of their own food. They were also permitted to drive, as I understand it, into Klamath Falls and Tule Lake. They were under guard 24 hours a day—under armed guard—in guard towers on the perimeter of the camp. The entire camp was fenced, partially at first, and later in entirety. It later was separated into various areas by wire fences. The living conditions, to me, for a person who had access to better accommodations, were very, very primitive. There was terrible mud in the wintertime. In the summertime, the dust blew every day. All of the buildings—that I recall—were tar paper covered. Do you have any more questions? Do you want some other angle?

ST: Yes, I have more questions. Were the internees ever allowed outside the camp area?

RK: Oh, yes. They were allowed outside the camp area. You see, they farmed on what they called—I believe it was the League of Nations and the frog pond, which is the U.S.

Bureau of Reclamation land that had been leased to private ranchers and farmers. During the duration of the camp, part of that land was turned over to the War Relocation Authority for use by the Japanese to produce part of their own food.

ST: Do you know if any of the townspeople ever came in contact with any of the Japanese or the internees?

RK: You mean outside the camp?

ST: Yes.

RK: That I couldn't tell you.

ST: Being a newspaper reporter, or correspondent, during the time, were you able to get information as to what was going on inside the camp?

RK: For the first few months, we were restricted. There was *nothing* allowed to be published. I did not go into the camp for at least a year, or year and a half after the camp was completed. It was started on another area, and the location was found unsuitable, so they moved it across what is now Highway 139, in Modoc County, where the present small township of Newell is located. And the first contact that I had was about a year and a half—that is, personal contact—after camp was located. Then I was given a pass to go in and out of the camp.

I went through the guard gate and was permitted to visit some of these families. But they made certain that you had no firearms, nothing that could be given to the Japanese to cause any difficulty. I was permitted to go into their mess halls where I saw them bring in the tubs and tubs of fish. I saw them bring in lots of bacon and hams. I saw the youngsters' recreation programs, which were supervised. I saw their motion picture theaters. I saw the schoolrooms but I didn't attend any classes. They were adequate for the type of camp that it was.

I might mention that they did have a small cemetery down there at one time. One child was buried—I do not know whether it was a boy or girl—alongside the railroad tracks close to where Bob Jones had a potato cellar, a potato processing or packing plant. That grave was there for quite some time with a small fence around it, then it disappeared. And I talked to Mr. Jones the other day about that. He recalled the grave, and he was under the impression that perhaps when they were resurfacing some of the road, that the Modoc County road construction crew perhaps bulldozed the grave away, in order to get gravel from there.

Now, there is one Japanese family, I understand, buried at Linkville Cemetery. I was told that by Gene Gregg, who is in charge of the two cemeteries in Klamath Falls: the Klamath Memorial Park and the old Linkville Cemetery. I do not know the names of those people. But I talked to Mr. Gregg about it when I understood that there was a group of Japanese coming in from the Sacramento area, who had lived in this camp. They were trying to find the graves of a number of people who were buried somewhere in this area, and who were unaccounted for.

Now, my understanding—and this was given to me by Wards Funeral Home in Klamath Falls—is that the Buddhists favored cremation. And at the time of the camp, the Earl Whitlock Funeral Home had the contract for caring for the bodies of the Buddhists, who desired cremation. They were sent to the Portland crematory, then the ashes—if the families requested—were sent back to the camp here. I saw a number of urns of ashes, members of the family that had been returned to this camp. They kept them on shelves and kept them with their—either Buddhist or Shinto—mementos that they used upon graves ordinarily, in cemeteries on the outside. I saw the ashes of this young man. Is it Nisei who is American born? He served with the famous 442nd in Italy. He was killed in Italy and his body was returned to the United States. He was cremated and his ashes were sent back to the Yamamoto family here at Tule Lake, and they were in an urn.

Apparently, they were permitted to bring in, later, some of their prized possessions, because I saw Japanese urns, Japanese figurines, Japanese artwork, and handwork in some of those homes down there. So they were apparently permitted to bring in some of that later.

[00:14:34]

ST: At first the camp was just a regular camp, but later it became a segregation center. That is the so-called disloyal Japanese were brought in to this camp. After this happened, was there a noticeable change in the camp atmosphere?

RK: It was among a certain group that they brought in from the other camps who were rebellious against confinement. Many of them were American born; many of them were Japanese born. I do not know whether any of them came from Hawaii or not, but I do know that some came here from Minidoka. They became belligerent after they had been confined down here for a period of time. Some of them were kept in guardhouses and in jails. They created constant disturbance. And, as you probably understand, the military, the U.S. Army was just across the fence, in separate quarters, a separate location from the Japanese. And they were—as I understand it—not permitted to go in until the situation got out of hand completely. Then they were permitted to go in on a night—a time when there was rioting all through the camp by this particular group of people. The Army was permitted to go through the fence and quell the riot.

ST: Now that you mentioned this group was a little radical, or a lot radical, did they do anything in particular to initiate their disfavor with the way they were being treated?

RK: There was one incident that I was familiar with, and that was when part of the group took over the hospital. The hospital, of course, was manned largely by non-Japanese doctors. There were both Japanese and non-Japanese nurses. There were some Japanese doctors, but I believe—and I'm sure I'm right—in saying the staff administration was white. A group of belligerents went into the hospital. They ran up the Japanese flag over the hospital. They tore down the American flag and they raised the Japanese flag over the hospital. And they beat up a doctor by the name of Doctor Petticord. Now, I do not remember his initials or given name, but he was beaten about the face, and that

was really the beginning of the end for the group of belligerents who were in the camp.

ST: Did they ever march or anything, this group?

RK: I never saw them marching. I didn't see them marching until they were marched out of the stockade down there where they had been held, to be loaded on the trains to be sent to ports for repatriation to Japan. Personally, I never saw them march. I heard many rumors of it, but I was never there at the time.

ST: Were you ever aware of any incidents in which anyone was killed?

RK: Only by hearsay. Through what they called the underground. They had the same opportunity to kill each other that anyone outside of the wire enclosure had. Many, many of them had reasons, I guess, because there were factions in there, who were unsympathetic toward those who were sympathetic to the fact—or who understood why they were there. To me, those who I came in contact with, were aware that the United States was panicky at the time, and they didn't know what else to do. The government or the administration didn't know what else to do at the time. And they didn't have time to differentiate between those who might be disloyal and those who weren't, so they put them all in camps.

ST: I have heard a story that a soldier killed one of the internees. Do you know anything about this? If it was just a rumor or if it was true?

[00:20:08]

RK: I could not verify that; I could not verify that. I heard the rumor, too, but those are the things that were kept from the newspaper at the time. There were *all* kinds of incidents that we never learned about until later. Some of them came out even after the camp was closed.

ST: In connection with this, I have heard there was a riot in November of one year. And I was wondering if you were allowed to find out about this right away, or if it was withheld?

RK: We were not; we were not. We were restricted in any information on that. It had to come through the War Relocation [Authority]. Even Mr. Ray Best, who was the camp administrator, or camp director, was not permitted to give out anything like that at all.

ST: Were you eventually able to get any information?

RK: Yes, eventually, yeah. It was through the *Herald and News*, through the managing editor, Mr. Malcolm Epley, Senior., who, at that time, during the period the camp was located down here, was managing editor. He was able to uncover exactly what was going on. The War Relocation [Authority] would not admit that it was not capable of handling the increasing dissent among certain groups. And they refused to call in the assistance from the Army that was available, until it reached the point when the administration down there at the camp was threatened with injury or death. Then they

called in the Army.

ST: I have also come across another incident in which Mr. Meyers was supposed to have been involved in—well, maybe not a complete riot, but at least an upsetting incident. Were you ever aware of this incident?

RK: Yes. The War Relocation Authority called him here to hear a list of complaints from the Japanese. I can't give the list of their requests or the complaints, but I know part of it was over food, part of it was over the administrative restrictions, part of it was over the living conditions in the camp. And the fact that they were—well, maybe I shouldn't say this. There was a controversy over the disposal of their property and that sort of thing.

ST: You mentioned that part of their dissention was over food. But earlier, you had mentioned that in one of your visits you had seen that they had things like lots of fish and hams. Were you aware that their food was supposedly good?

RK: I was in their mess halls and their kitchens, and part of their complaint was that they were not getting the type of fish—the kind of fish—and in the amount they thought they should get. They also complained about the fact that they didn't get enough bacon or enough fresh meat. There is one story—which might be nothing but rumor—of one young Japanese who was seen taking a slab of bacon from the kitchen and heading toward his own barracks, with the slab of bacon poked down in the front of his britches. There were all kinds of rumors, all kinds of those stories—of them stealing candy, which was probably true.

ST: As the camp was becoming more hostile, you have mentioned that some were repatriated. Do you know if these were people who desired to be repatriated, or if the government selected them?

RK: Frankly, I am not sure about that, but I am quite sure that most of them demanded repatriation. Those that I was aware of—those that I saw—were younger people, from perhaps eighteen to their mid-thirties. I do not recall seeing any older of the Japanese in that group at all. I saw them when they were loaded on trains to be taken to Seattle. And I believe some of them went to San Francisco, but most of them went to Seattle and Portland, I think. But I don't recall seeing any of the older Japanese at all. They were the ones who were docile, and *accepted* the situation. Understanding—many of them as true Americans—just exactly why they were there.

ST: Just to back up for a moment, I am not sure if we had covered this or not, but I think we had mentioned that they were allowed to go outside of the camp. But did we mention that it was because they were allowed to farm? Because you had mentioned this problem with food.

RK: Yes.

ST: They *were* allowed to have their own farms?

RK: Yes, well now, this was a community farm. They were expected to plant and irrigate

and harvest, and all of that food went into the general food supply. They had no individual farms at all. The land was simply provided, and the seed was provided, and the irrigation waters were provided. But they had no individual farms.

ST: Okay, thank you. Now, as the war was over and the camp was beginning to close out, what happened to the internees and to the camp as it was being dismantled?

RK: That's one thing that I have wondered about: what happened to them? Because my understanding is that much of their land and much of their property was sold for minimal prices. I just don't know what they went back to. I know that I was in the camp the day that the last of them left, and they left with just about what they took into the camp. What their future was, or how they regained their land, I don't know.

Mrs. Yamamoto has perhaps one of the most poignant stories, to me, and it's one that I have written a number of times. She had three children. Nancy was a senior at the University of California at Berkeley. Obie was the son who was repatriated to Japan; he was one of the belligerents. Arnold, born in this country, was with the 442nd and was killed in Italy. Nancy died down there, apparently of a broken heart. She worked, during the time that I knew her, on the *Newell Star*, the Japanese American newspaper. And it was through Nancy that I met a number of the Japanese families. Obie was repatriated. On the day that he left—I saw his mother—they were all under heavy guard. I saw him removed from the enclosure where they had held them, waiting for the train to come. I saw him pass by his mother and father. And his mother held out her hand, and I was unable to see what was in it, but there must have been some sort of a small emblem, and she held out toward him. And he struck her hand and knocked it into the dust. The other boy died. [recording pauses]

ST: He knocked the—?

RK: He knocked this emblem or whatever it was that she had in her hand. I couldn't see it, but it was a small item of some kind. He knocked her hand and knocked it into the dust. Then he was led away and taken to the train. The other son, the youngest son was killed in Italy. [background noise]

ST: That's okay; go ahead.

RK: There were many of those who were repatriated whose families remained here. And my understanding is that none of those that were returned to Japan were allowed to return to the United States.

ST: Now, as the last of these left the camp, what happened to the camp? How was it dismantled?

[00:30:00]

RK: The barracks buildings were given away. Most of them were given away. Some of them were kept there, oh, for a number of years, and were reused by various groups for the material that they could get out of them. There was coal, pipe, fencing, electrical

supplies, and that sort of thing. That was distributed among the last of the veteran homesteaders, who I am quite sure came in 1947. The watchtowers were torn down. One remained for quite some time afterwards; it is now gone. Some of the barracks buildings were distributed among ranchers who could use the material. Part of the buildings in the military area, I believe, are being used as a hunting lodge.

ST: I would like to take this opportunity now to allow you to expand on anything, or to bring anything in you would like to mention that I haven't asked you about.

RK: Well, the only thing—and I am going to explain that this is secondhand. There was corruption among the non-Japanese in the handling of government properties. There was widespread rumors of corruption in the camp, especially in the administration and in the handling of government properties that were *stored* down there. At this particular time, I would rather not mention names, but it is a matter of record somewhere as to the disposal of numerous properties that were sent in there, in carload lots, for the use of the camp. Some of that property was sold and some of it was given away. At the time the camp actually closed, much of the property that remained, that was destroyed. It was not sold. Now, that is just about it.

ST: I would like to thank you, Mrs. King, for your interview. It has been very interesting. You obviously have a very good memory and I'm sure the university will appreciate your help and cooperation very much. Thank you!

RK: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW