

## Guest Commentary

# My Family's Wartime Experience

Reflections of a Fired Railroad Worker's Daughter

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Sutter St., 2nd Floor in San Francisco.  
For many agonizing months,



(Note: The following commentary reflects a viewpoint of Japanese American railroad workers fired during World War II. They are currently seeking redress and reparations from the United States government.)

By IDA NISHIGUCHI  
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My father was a section foreman for the Western Pacific Railroad Company in charge of a maintenance crew of several men.

The town we lived in, Gerlach, Nevada, was a typical railroad town in a remote area — population not much more than 200, one hotel, one restaurant, post office, grammar

school, high school, six to seven saloons, no church. A Presbyterian missionary came out once or twice a month to conduct services and vacation Bible school two weeks during the summer.

We were the only Japanese family in the community.

I was 10 years old when my father moved to Gerlach and 19 years old when Japan and the United States declared war. I was attending school in Salt Lake City and lived in the dorms.

At Christmas time, right after Pearl Harbor, everyone was busily preparing to go home for the holidays. When I went to the station to make travel arrangements, I was told that I would not be allowed to ride the trains. I was so scared — of being left all alone in a big empty three-story building; but, of course, in retrospect, I realize that no one would allow this to happen.

Mr. Anderson, my sociology instructor, came to me immediately and said that he and his wife were prepared to drive the 500 miles to get me home. In the meantime, Dr. Steele, the college president, communicated with the railroad officials and obtained permission for me to board the train. I still have the letter that Dr. Steele wrote, attesting to my citizenship and character, that I had to carry with me.

In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor, my father was suddenly declared an "enemy alien," fired from his job and ordered to vacate the railroad premises within 24 hours. Four of the youngest members of our family were at home at the time and both sons were in the military service.

We thought everyone in town was our friend, but quickly found out that less than a handful were willing to come to our family's aid. Everyone in Gerlach, except for the few, turned their backs on my family — people who we considered close friends, with whom we played together, shared meals, and were in and out of each other's homes, many times

staying overnight.

Anyway, someone was able to locate a small two-wheel trailer which was moved out to the middle of the desert beyond the two-mile radius which the railroad company deemed the "sensitive/vital" zone, in case my father should decide to sabotage the railroad.

And this is where my parents and youngest sister were forced to live, under constant surveillance by two gun-toting agents (one of whom according to my father and sister was from the FBI) and the town constable, who also was armed. In the middle of winter without benefit of water (which along with food was carried out to them), no electricity, no toilet facilities, not even an outhouse.

There were only a few months left in the school year, so my three youngest sisters received special permission to remain in town, under strict curfew rules, to complete the school year. I, too, at the insistence of my parents, had returned to school.

Fortunately, my oldest sister whose home was in Tennessee, happened to be visiting the family when my parents were kicked out, so she rented a small shack and supervised her younger sisters. The sister who graduated high school was able to attend commencement exercise only with the escort of the town constable, with a gun at his side.

After the school year ended, my family relocated to Reno, Nevada, with only my parents' small savings and without assurance of employment or income. My father worked for a few meager dollars on a vegetable farm and two of us older girls found jobs doing housework.

My oldest brother, who was in the military service, sent home his entire paycheck of \$45 a month, which was matched by the government for men with dependent families, for a total of \$90 a month.

My brother Roy was stationed at Fort Ord, California. He was granted an emergency furlough to visit our parents.

His bus arrived late in Reno so he decided to spend the night at the Overland Hotel (which was near the bus depot) and arrange for traveling connections the next morning. Despite wearing the United States Army uniform, he was denied lodging.

My brother became so incensed and outraged that he threw a marble pen stand at the desk clerk, barely missing him. Roy immediately hired a taxi — using the money he had borrowed from his buddies which he intended to give to our parents — to take him to Portola, California, which was the nearest point of connection with a train that goes through Gerlach.

Upon arriving, he plodded out to my parents' trailer through sticky alkaline mud. He tried their door, which was locked. He could hear their fearful whispers and called out to them. My brother was unaware that he was being followed, probably because of being preoccupied with trying to remove the heavy mud which kept caking on his shoes.

Just as he and my parents were embracing in a tearful and emotional reunion, there was a very loud knock on the door. Roy opened it to face the muzzle of a gun. The railroad agent declared that he was there to make sure our parents did not try to enter railroad property. In his rage, my brother told him to go ahead and shoot or he would take the agent's gun and shove it up his "rear."

My brother left three days later to return to his camp, tortured with helplessness and frustration and consumed with rage.

My parents never talked about their experiences. I think they felt ashamed. But I remember a couple of times when my father let down his guard to express his profound humiliation.

We all feel that we were subjected to every bit the same hardships, degradation and deprivations suffered by the West Coast internees, with one

exception: We were thrown out into a hostile environment to "sink or swim" without provision for transportation, food or shelter.

Ida Nishiguchi Otani writes from Rocklin, California.