

Steve Okazaki's Latest Documentary Film:

'Days of Waiting' Tells Arthur-Estelle Ishigo Story

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SAN FRANCISCO

The story of artist Estelle Peck Ishigo, who accompanied her Nisei husband to camp during the wartime internment, came to an end with her death earlier this year in a Hollywood convalescent hospital.

But her words and pictures have been given new life in Steven Okazaki's documentary "Days of Waiting." The film, which utilizes notes, photos and drawings that Ishigo collected over the years, is not only an indictment of the camps but also a love story. Estelle Peck and Arthur Ishigo were married from 1928 to Arthur's death in 1957.

The hard times that the couple had are recounted. Because of California's anti-miscegenation laws, they had to go to Mexico to get married. Disowned by her parents, Estelle adopted the Japanese American community as her own.

The Ishigos were living in Los Angeles in 1942 and were interned first at the Pomona Assembly Center, then at Heart Mountain, Wyo. As a non-Nikkei, Estelle was not required by law to go to camp, but she refused to be separated from her husband.

After the war, the couple ended up living in a trailer camp and received only about \$100 in compensation from the government, even after submitting a detailed list of all the property they had lost as a result of the evacuation.

Piecing Together the Story

Okazaki, whose previous films include the documentaries *Survivors*, *Unfinished Business* and the comedy *Living on Tokyo Time*, had originally planned to focus on three camp artists.

"We were looking for three pretty different stories and picked five possible people that we thought could be subjects," he said. "... Then things started going wrong. One of the artists died, another had cancer ... and then another had some emotional problems. ...

"So we had two people. One was an artist in New York and the other was Estelle Ishigo. I soon realized that ... three would have been ideal. You can go back and forth, jump from one to another. Two doesn't make sense narrative-wise. It seems like you're comparing the two."

Okazaki decided on Ishigo because of the uniqueness of her story and "because she had kept a record of her life. She had taken diary notes, she had written notes on gas bills, had filled up these little five-cent spiral notebooks. She had a very particular sense that she was going through something historic."

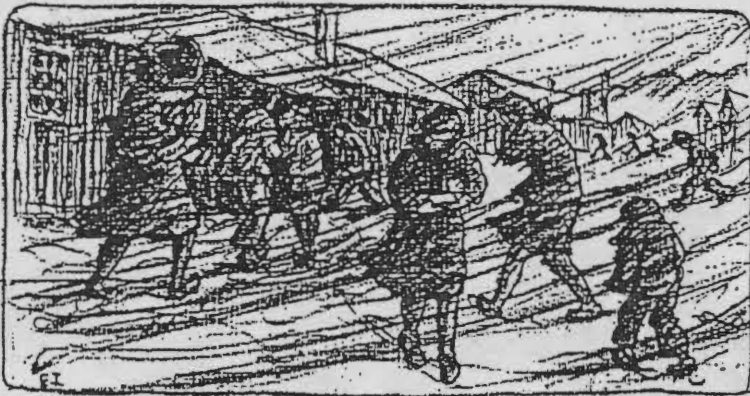
With the help of associate producer Cheryl Yoshioka and advisor Bacon Sakatani, a former Heart Mountain internee, Okazaki searched through Ishigo's papers, many of which were in storage at UCLA.

In addition, many of Ishigo's drawings and recollections of camp are included in her 1972 book *Lone Heart Mountain*.

As for Ishigo herself, "I knew she was very ill and very old, but I thought for the sake of trying we would try to interview her," Okazaki said. "It went very slow, it was really difficult, so we didn't use it." A narrator was used in the film, which closes with a shot of Ishigo sitting in a wheelchair in her hospital room.

A group of former Heart Mountain internees had found Ishigo in "this basement apartment where she was just living on Campbell's soup and crackers," he said. Both of her legs had to be amputated below the knees due to gangrene.

Okazaki attributed her condition in large part to the camps. "I think her



ONE OF ESTELLE ISHIGO'S SKETCHES—about camp life.

husband was really broken by it, and when she lost him, that's when things started falling apart. I think she was very strong until she lost him."

A friend who visited Ishigo regularly in her final years told Okazaki that the



PC Photo courtesy Mouchette Films.

ESTELLE ISHIGO—

at Heart Mountain in 1942

only thing she reacted to was a picture of her husband.

Finding an Audience

The San Francisco filmmaker thinks *Days of Waiting* can be educational for Nikkei as well as non-Nikkei. It may "help Caucasians look at it (the internment) differently and not be so on guard when they're watching it, but I think that Nikkei are very self-conscious and protective of that experience too. Watching it from her point of view, I think, allows them another way of looking at it."

Another idea behind the project was "to show how these (camp) artists contributed so much to the community and felt a sense of mission, of responsibility, and how much they suffered just for being artists, with very little return in terms of support from the community," said Okazaki.

That problem has continued to the present, he maintained. "A lot of Asian Americans are very attracted to the arts or media, but it's hard to work in that

community context ... I think the community itself needs to show more encouragement, aside from when you get some mainstream acceptance and the community follows behind."

The film has been shown at film festivals in San Francisco, in Chicago, where it won an award, and in Hawaii, where one audience voted it their favorite documentary. At the Hawaii screenings, "people seemed to respond well to the film" regardless of their age bracket, he recalled.

Days of Waiting will also be broadcast on the PBS series "P.O.V." this summer.

Explaining the appeal of the film, Okazaki said, "Just as a personal story, it's really fascinating, and I wish we had more time in the film to get into other aspects of her life. She had an incredibly rough life."

To "stay fairly positive about life" during those trying times, as Ishigo did, "is rather extraordinary," he said.

Although the film will bring renewed recognition to Ishigo, Okazaki regrets that she will not be around to enjoy it. "The film's just a little bit late."

The film was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Zellerbach Family Fund and Columbia Foundation.

Okazaki, who spent a year working on *Days of Waiting*, has several other projects pending. "I've spent a lot of time in anticipation, expecting, working with other people and waiting for deals to come through," he said.

I've realized I've just got to go back to instigating my own projects and back to working more independently, because if you work with other people in these development situations, you can spend a lot of time just developing and not doing any work."

Despite his Oscar nomination for *Unfinished Business*, he said steady work in documentary filmmaking is impossible "unless you go into a TV series, producing 13 shows for a whole season ... which I don't really want to do."

So he plans to continue making films he can be proud of, even though he could be making "better money managing a McDonald's."

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