

Thursday

JUNE 2, 1988

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

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Camps couldn't contain pride of American Japanese

Survivors of the sorriest episode in American history, in this century anyway, gathered in Sacramento last weekend. I was privileged to be there, and I got another taste of a feeling I don't seem to enjoy more as it becomes more familiar.

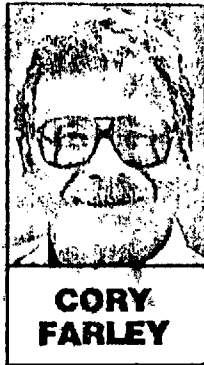
I was ashamed to be a blue-eyed, brown-haired American.

The gathering was a reunion of Americans of Japanese ancestry who were interned at Tule Lake, Calif., during World War II. More than 600 people, out of a camp population of 15,000, made the trip.

"Americans of Japanese ancestry" is an awkward term, but it's the right one. At the beginning of the war, there was bitter sentiment against Japan. So these people — many of them U.S. citizens, many a generation or more away from Japan — were simply herded together and locked up.

They had committed no crime. To my knowledge, none ever was found guilty of acting against his or her country, then or later. Yet thousands were held, in isolated places, in prison conditions, under armed guard, for years.

Newspapers denounced them, and ran



pictures and stories explaining how to tell the "crafty" Japanese from other, presumably non-crafty, Asians. Even American Japanese who were in the United States Army — where they made up the most decorated American combat unit in World War II — were virtual prisoners when they came West to visit their families. Camp newspapers I've seen are full of items like, "Sgt. Adam Nogaki is on leave from such-and-such infantry division. He'll be staying with his parents in 7311-A." 7311-A was just another cubicle within the barbed wire.

These American Japanese have been in the news lately because Congress is considering a bill to pay them \$20,000 per person in partial reparation for what was done to them. The bill is probably going to pass, though if certain legislators have their way it will carry stipulations that could make it almost meaningless.

There was some worry at the reunion about that, and some worry that President Reagan might veto it. And a few people, when they found out I was from Nevada, introduced themselves and asked me pointed questions about Sen. Chic Hecht. Hecht has said he opposes the bill in part because the interned Americans "suffered no loss."

If he believes that, he is working hard to keep his eyes shut and his fingers in his ears.

I was at the reunion as a guest, and most of the people I spoke with don't know what I do for a living. It wouldn't be fair to use their names. But just for one example, I met a man who was

forced, on a few days' notice before he was locked up, to sell a hotel he'd spent years developing. Top offer was \$500, which he had to accept. Another internee left a small farm and its equipment in the care of a trusted neighbor. When he returned, the farm was gone. There were no fences, no buildings, no sign they had ever existed.

"Farm?" said the neighbor, suddenly a land baron. "What do you mean? Get off my land, Jap." There are many more such stories.

As sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, I'm going to get two kinds of letters about this. One kind will start with profanity and ethnic slurs and deteriorate from there. I won't read most of those, because the hatred often flows over to the outside. I rarely open mail with obscenities scrawled on the back of the envelope.

The other kind, though, will be right: I'm too young to remember Pearl Harbor, and the war I do remember, Vietnam, doesn't give me any base for understanding feelings in the United States in World War II.

But I've been to Pearl Harbor. About 3,700 people, mostly military, died there on Dec. 7, 1941. I've been to Hiroshima, too. About 92,000 people, mostly civilians, died there on Aug. 6, 1945. God alone knows how many died weeks or months later, of radiation or burns. And three days later we did the same thing to another 40,000-plus in Nagasaki.

But that doesn't have much to do with

the Americans who were locked up at Tule Lake, or at Poston or Heart Mountain or the rest of the camps. That's the whole point of this: They were, they are, Americans, no more Japanese than Paul Laxalt is Basque or Michael Dukakis is Greek.

The most surprising thing about the reunion, to me, was that I didn't detect any bitterness. True, they've had years to get over it. So have many veterans of Vietnam. Yet I've seen more bitterness in one bar rail of ex-grunts who think the government screwed them than I could find in a banquet room of these people who have been unarguably, irrevocably and governmentally screwed.

I talked with a veterinarian, a trophy shop owner, an editor, a prison official, several teachers, many people who went on, after their releases, to become successful in whatever career they chose. Tule Lake happened; it took years from their lives and who can say what from their self-respect. But it ended, and they've remained, worked and paid taxes in a country that put them in jail for nothing.

"Were you ever bitter about it?" I asked some of them.

"It is a Japanese trait," the trophy shop owner said, "to believe that what has happened has happened. You can't change the past. You go on to the future."

Cory Farley is a Gazette-Journal columnist. His column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.