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THE STORY OF THE
NITTAS

A Touching Human
Document



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The Story of The Nittas

Shosuke Nitta crossed the Pacific from Japan so many years ago that memory has lost the picture of his early life.

He came to California because this was the land of opportunity, and here a man could settle and prosper and grow with a new frontier.

Shosuke had an inbred love of the soil, and he knew how to till fields, to produce crops, to keep everlastingly at work. To a barren Southern California, from which the desert winds whipped the loose top soil in blazing "santanas," he went in search of his future.

He found it in the home of the "santanas," on scorched, desert acres where one could build for the benefit of all.

He, and many like him, and their caucasian neighbors, made the rich soil bloom with field crops, rich citrus orchards, fine trees, lawns about the houses, flowers about the lawns. And because they fought through the frontier and covered the land with green crops, and flooded the crops with irrigation waters, the "santanas" disappeared and the people of Southern California spoke of the blazing, killing sandstorms as old and unpleasant memories.

It was not fitting that a man should live his life alone. But there had been agitation against these people in California. The newspapers spoke of the "yellow menace," and exclusion laws were passed. Shosuke could no longer add to his acres for he was an alien who could buy no more land.

He was lonely and he was confused, and he needed someone to share his thoughts and his plans, so from Japan came Taka, young and lovely, to his exile to become his wife.

By this time, Shosuke was 35 years old and Taka was 29. Other young women came with her, but forever there would be a lost generation—an age group which had lapsed between the time Shosuke was 21 and when he married, 16 years later.

Shosuke and Taka did not feel personally the resentment of the caucasians. The exclusion laws and the land laws were a general thing. Among their own caucasian friends the Nittas dwelt in peace. They could help their neighbors, for they knew the soil and the tricks of making it bloom, so their neighbors learned from the Nittas.

And every Sunday morning, they went to the Methodist church in Santa Ana and worshipped God. They sang the hymns, prayed with their friends, shook the hands of the pastor, and told him his sermon was good. They attended

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The writer, Milton Corthel Phinney, has been a newspaperman for 20 years, working exclusively on the Pacific coast. He was graduated from Kern County Union high school, worked for the Bakersfield Morning Echo, Bakersfield Press, Oakland Tribune, San Francisco Call-Bulletin, and the Daily News of Los Angeles.

He has covered old uprisings of the Ku Klux Klan in interior California; the San Francisco general strike; has been political editor and newspaper representative at Sacramento legislative sessions; has reported many famous trials, including the Mooney-Billings hearings before the California supreme court; has been sports writer, feature writer and editor in addition to political reporting.

He has known the Japanese situation in California for 25 years, since introduction to it upon his arrival from New York state at the age of 13.

He spent 16 months in the army air forces, where he served as corporal, and upon his return from the army he took the trip from Poston, Ariz., to Santa Ana with the first returning Japanese family. This is his account of that story.

church suppers, enjoyed children's days, took part in the Christmas programs.

In time came youngsters to bless the home and to make more binding the admiration and respect of their church and ranch friends. There was Hitoshi, then Minoru, then Mitsuo.

● 'YOU ARE AMERICANS'

As the children grew, they attended the Santa Ana schools. At home, their parents said:

"You are Americans—you are Nisei. This is your country. You are to remember, always, you are Americans. Do not forget the heritage of your race,

nor the good parts of the culture which we hand down to you. But remember always, you are Americans."

This was the future toward which father Shosuke had looked when he came to America so many years ago. Now he saw his dreams realized through his youngsters. He saw them taking their place not simply as Americans, but as leaders among their American friends.

Now, when Sunday morning came, father Shosuke and mother Taka took three thoroughly scrubbed, shining little Nittas by the hand and together they went to the Methodist church. The three little Nittas sat big-eyed and solemn in the Sunday school classes where their caucasian friends squirmed and fidgeted.

They were thus keeping that best of their cultural heritage while becoming Americans. They were excellently behaved. They revered their parents, and they obeyed them unquestioningly.

To all elders, in the church, in school, their neighbors, they were unfailingly polite. Caucasian friends were telling their children, "Children are to be seen and not heard—why can't you be more like the Nitta boys? You don't see them behaving like that."

And so it went through the years. Hitoshi, the eldest, went to grammar school. Then he went to Santa Ana high school. There were dates, and parties, and dances. There were picture shows and ice cream sodas and meetings of the school clubs.

Yet there were also chores around the ranch, and the constant learning from father Shosuke—those secrets of the soil, and those sage words of thrift, and above all, that advice that Hitoshi must better himself.

Hitoshi, father Shosuke said, would have all those things the other American boys had. He would go to college. There he should have opportunity which only America could offer.

● POPULAR AT SCHOOL

In high school, Hitoshi heard his name shouted by a thousand friends as he stepped to the plate and took a cut for good old Santa Ana, and sent the baseball spinning over the fence. When graduation day came, father Shosuke and mother Taka with the two



Acme photo.
MARY NITTA and her baby

younger Nittas went to the auditorium and saw their first born receive his diploma.

The principal shook their hands and told them what a fine boy they had, and the Nittas bowed and smiled and thanked him for all the school had done. Friends came over to chat with them and congratulate Hitoshi on his fine record.

In 1935 that was, and the next fall, with his big Santa Ana varsity letter on his sweater, Hitoshi attended Santa Ana Jr. College one year, then was off to California Polytechnic Institute for that education which the elder Nittas had sworn he must have.

He studied hard at agriculture and mechanics, and in the summer he would return to the ranch and pitch in to apply his new knowledge.

But he wasn't the only worker now. Minoru and Mitsuo were following Hitoshi's footsteps. They, too, were going to schools in Santa Ana, and one day they, too, would receive their diplomas and watch their elders beam as Caucasian neighbors congratulated them.

Minoru was even more active in athletics than his older brother. People began to refer to him as a BMOC—Big Man on Campus. He played football, and after high school, went to the famous Santa Ana junior college, where football was a major sport, and where Minoru was good enough to land a job as blocking halfback.

But it was in football that he received a knee injury which was to prove bothersome for many years.

Mitsuo also made his parents proud. Everywhere they went people told them, what a wonderful game he had played, and it didn't matter what the game—

football, basketball, baseball and track—he won letters in all at the high school.

● HONORS—THEN PEARL HARBOR

Mits went on to California Agricultural College at Davis, and again it was, "Nitta—Rah! Rah! Rah!" from the bleachers. Three years he starred on the varsity teams, and in 1941 came the proudest moment in the history of the ranch near Santa Ana.

The Cal Aggie football team had named Mitsuo Nitta honorary captain!

It was the first time a Nisei—second generation Japanese-American—had been so honored. Papa Shosuke like to bust his buttons, he was that proud. Everybody told him, "We knew Mits could do it."

Everybody knew the Nittas. It was no surprise to anyone when one of the leading service clubs asked him to become a member.

Now tragedy hovered over the world, and into the history of America was written that chapter headed, "Pearl Harbor."

The Nittas looked from the screaming headlines to their children and their broad acres. The boys, now coming of an age when they must look to their own future, had acquired greater acreage, become more prosperous, taken their places among the adults of the community.

Shocked, incredulous, they saw this war coming from the homeland of their parents.

They heard the approach of a tragedy which was to sweep their people into one of the blackest chronicles of the historians.

Father Shosuke heard it on the street: "Those damned Japs! Those yellow so-and-sos!" Sadly he shook his head. Sadly

on that Sunday the Nittas went to church and bowed to their God.

Mitsuo of Aggie fame went first.

February 23, 1942 he reported to the Newport Beach selective service board.

"America is your country—always remember that," father Shosuke had always told him. Now he was going to the defense of his country. To Fort McArthur—to Camp Robinson, Ark. Basic training, marching, learning things the army way—and becoming so adept that they kept him at Robinson to become an instructor; an instructor showing other American boys how to fight and kill Japanese in the south Pacific in defense of Mitsuo Nitta's homeland.

At home, father and mother Nitta heard of Mitsuo's record, and were proud again. Friends asked about his progress, and Shosuke or Hitoshi could tell them he was "doing just fine—just fine."

● UPROOTED!

Anxiously, the Nittas watched the newspapers. Day after day a general sat up in San Francisco and issued orders. "Japanese are told to move inland." "Japanese are told to clear Terminal Island." "Japanese are excluded from defense areas." "Japanese are asked to leave coast voluntarily."

And then:

"Japs to be excluded!"

That hurt in so many ways. Now their American friends were no longer polite. They were no longer calling the Nittas of California "Japanese," but that short, ugly "Japs."

But most of all, they were telling these American boys that the place where they had led their football teams, where they had enjoyed their choc malts, where they had attended their



Acme photo.
ALL MEALS were served cafeteria style, for elders and youngsters, in public mess hall. Mary Nitta (left), her husband Hitoshi, at their last Poston meal with Hitoshi's father and mother (near end of bench at right).

churches, where they had been the BMOG, was forbidden territory.

They were putting up a "no trespass" sign on the land where Hitoshi and Minoru and Mitsuo were born and raised, and Americans were saying to Americans, "You of Japanese ancestry are not really Americans after all."

Minoru had married now, and anxiously he discussed with Fusaye, his wife, and his brother Hitoshi, what this would mean to them.

May 1, 1942, they found out.

Hurriedly, they made arrangements with their ranch foreman, their worker and friend for 20 years, to take charge of their property. Then with a few personal possessions in boxes, a few clothes and necessities in suitcases, they went to the station.

There were no great friendly groups now, congratulating Shosuke and Taka on their fine boys. There were soldiers in helmets and field equipment, with rifles. And they herded the Nittas aboard a bus, and took them away from the green fields and broad acres which Shosuke had cultivated for 40 years.

Shosuke was an old man now. He was 62 years old, and Taka was 56. This, they, was what they had worked all their lives to achieve.

"But this is still America—this is still our country," they told their sons.

Over the desert went a forlorn caravan of busses, cars, trucks—and army jeeps. Down through Indio, onto the desert floor, through Desert Center, along that bleak, string-straight 87 miles that led to the Colorado River, and Arizona.



WHEN the Nittas left Poston, there were many goodbyes. An older woman bows politely as she bids farewell to Mary Nitta.

At the end of the trail was Poston.

At the end of the world, really.

In the last century, a government which had mercilessly slain, exploited and all but annihilated the original in-

habitants of this land, in a moment of not too great remorse, had assigned to the Indians forever 110,000 acres of land in the most barren, unpleasant, bleak part of the entire nation, along the Colorado in Arizona.

There was nothing there but sand and rock, alkali and weeds, wind and extreme temperatures.

It was here that the government now set up a center for the evacuated Japanese-Americans.

The job was in the hands of the army, and that general who sat up in San Francisco and made decisions.

When the Nittas, and thousands like them, arrived, the heat of summer was just beginning.

There were some barracks up—long, low structures, hot as ovens, bleak and black, set smackdab under the desert sun with no protection. There weren't even enough to house all the refugees. They must pitch in and help the army finish its job.

Around it all stretched a wire fence, and at the gate were armed guards. The army made it plain—this was not a "concentration camp." Nobody was possibly to draw a conclusion. This was a "reception center."

● PIONEERS ONCE MORE

The wind howled, and the dust storms raged. The miserable people fought against the biting gales, tried to keep clean with the harsh, alkaline water which parched and cracked their skin, made open sores.



Acme photos.

THE NITTAS confer with their banker, L. S. Mortensen, vice president of the First National Bank in Santa Ana, California.

But they pitched in and fought the first battle of the pioneers—making a home in the wilderness.

Father Shosuke and many of his generation knew this job for they had done it once before, 40 years ago. They had never thought they must be uprooted to do it again.

Now they taught the young people what they had learned, and Hitoshi and the boys of his generation, with their college background and agricultural and mechanical training, quickly adapted themselves.

The barracks were finished. Apartments were made, several to each barracks, one room affairs, with flimsy partitions between. There was no such thing as privacy; little of family life. They must eat in mess halls. There were no facilities for cooking in the barracks. They must use common latrines, common laundries, common showers. None of these were provided for individual families.

How great was the ache of loneliness for their scrupulously clean Santa Ana home that first night as the Nittas entered their cheerless "apartment." They had been a clean, average American family, not wealthy—not poor—but of a class of American life which has nice beds, nice bedrooms, cheerful living quarters.

Here, in the first night, they were given iron army cots. There was little else in the "apartment." They must stand in line and receive a bedding tick from the quartermaster. They must fill the tick with straw from a common strawpile, dumped on the ground. This was their mattress.

Outside the wind howled, and through the cracks of the window, the dust swirled, landing on everything.

And around the wire fence, the sentries patrolled with rifles on shoulder.

Life in Poston would make or break an American. This was their test.

● KEPT FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

In the months to come, many would break. Some embittered, would be sent away to the Tule Lake camp up in Northern California. They would be an infinitesimally small number of the whole. They would be labeled "disloyal."

Yet, where would the government find out about them? How could it be determined they were disloyal?

The other people in the camp reported them. The other loyal American citizens, and Americans-by-choice, would report them. In no other way could they be discovered. This was proving their loyalty the hard way.

Came the heat of summer in this cheerless waste. Through it, the Japanese-Americans labored and produced Poston, Arizona.

They finished the barracks, they built others as mess halls, they constructed laundries, they erected church-

es, they went to work on a hospital, they set up cooperatives.

The dust heap that served as a road from Parker, 17 miles away, gave way to a wide, fine highway, of gravel, surveyed, leveled and built by the evacuees.

Poston became not one village, but three. They were known as "units," and numbered from one to three. Each was about three miles apart down the highway from the original camp.

A chicken ranch was established, a hog ranch was underway, a slaughter house was built, vegetable gardens were set up, field crops were put in, grain was planted.

Through temperatures which reached 125 degrees, through sandstorms which ripped the tops from buildings, through conditions which most people would find unbearable, these Americans of Japanese ancestry, and these Japanese who were Americans by choice, put up with conditions as they were and the fathers and mothers, like Shosuke and Taka, counseled:

"Our plight will be recognized; our government will act; our story will be heard. We are Americans. Do not forget it."

The cooperatives staffed and stocked stores. They put in beauty salons. They staffed barber shops. The cooperatives paid their own workers, the prevailing government wage, but they took the burden of that wage off the government by paying out of their own funds.

● ORGANIZE CHURCH

Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops were formed. YMCA and YWCA became active, important groups within the community. Each camp set up its USO—for by now, Americans were visiting their friends and relatives at Poston when they had leave from the armed services. In the camp, the selective service office functioned to ship the young men off to war.

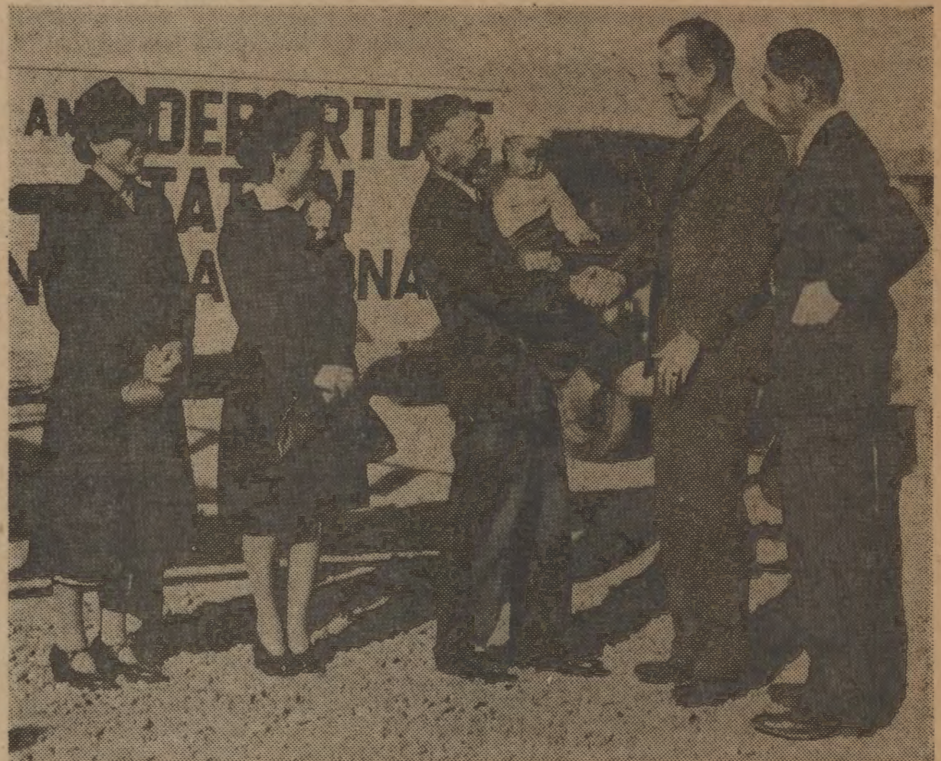
Father Nitta interested himself in the formation of the church in the community. There were two—Christian and Buddhist. Shosuke was interested in bringing the Christians together, regardless of denomination. So the Christian church was formed and he became a member of the official board.

When the plans for the 2500 acres of planting were worked out, Shosuke again volunteered. Now he became a member of the executive board of the agricultural unit in the center.

One day the army would practically disappear from Poston, and then the evacuees would feel a great relief. The center would, in fact, become a "relocation center," from which evacuees could hope to achieve freedom by moving to jobs inland.

Yet, jobs inland would not appeal to a great many people such as father and mother Nitta, whose home was in California, whose life was behind them, whose future—if any—was back home once more in Santa Ana.

Poston had been designed for 20,000



GOODBYE to Poston (L to R) Mrs. Shosuki Nitta, Mrs. Mary Nitta, Shosuki Nitta holding grandson Hitoshi Alan, Duncan Mills, director Poston relocation center, and Hitoshi Nitta.

Acma Photo

people. It never reached that number, but it came close.

● HELP WAR EFFORT

Through that first summer, before relocation started, the people concentrated on beautifying their homes, and that process has gone on constantly since.

Thousands have been relocated inland. Some are on farms, some in war plants, some in defense industries. In addition to those, the armed services have claimed many from Poston.

In August, 1942, Mary Yamagata came to Poston.

Mary's family had practically the same history of early settlement in California as the Nittas. They had chosen to establish themselves in Reedley, Fresno County, where Mary was born.

Until she went to school, Mary spoke no English, because her parents didn't. There were seven children in Mary's family, and she was the eldest.

When she went to school, Mary acquired not only perfect English and perfect Americanism, but she acquired a very independent attitude. Nobody could push Mary around. She had a mind of her own.

She grew into a perfectly beautiful girl, who was just as good as she looked. She, too, had a background of parental-church teaching. And she was told repeatedly:

"This is America, and we are Americans. Choose from the ancient culture of Japan those things which are worthwhile, and add them to your American teaching."

She had grown up in Reedley, gone through school there, and developed a great ambition to be a nurse. So nurse she must be, and she went to University of California for three years and then to Fresno to take her training in the excellent Fresno General hospital.

Evacuation hit her perhaps harder than the Nittas. She was resentful that a thing like this could occur to Americans. It was the end of her world (she thought) when in the terrific heat of August, she, her family, hundreds of their friends, were herded under army guns aboard outdated, hot unsanitary train coaches and started for the desert.

...The army passed out box lunches, including dry, unpalatable cold beef sandwiches. Across the desert the trail rolled, and to get a breath of moving air, all the windows were opened. Still, it was stifling. The evacuees looked at the army lunches. Then they dug out the excellent lunches they had prepared for themselves—roast chicken, salads, fresh sandwiches, cold drinks.

In disdain, derision and anger, they flung the cold beef sandwiches the army had provided at passing telegraph poles.

When the dusty, hot train pulled into the little station at Parker, the evacuees were met by other evacuees, who had



MARY NITTA and Alan pause for lunch during packing at Poston before departure. Story page 8. (Acme Photo.)

been there some time, and were driving trucks. These people begged for the army sandwiches that might be left. Mary and the others stood around and laughed as the old timers ravenously ate what had not been thrown away.

Mary stopped laughing within a couple of days, when she found that the sandwiches were good compared to the food served in the "center."

Mary went to work in the camp hospital. She'd been there about two days when Hitoshi Nitta saw her. Hitoshi was calling on a doctor, a friend of his, when Mary went by in her crisply starched white uniform.

"Introduce me to that girl," Hitoshi demanded.

"Well, I would if I could, but she's only been here two days, and I can't remember her name," said the doctor.

Hitoshi wouldn't be put off. He was going to meet her. Eventually he did meet her.

"He fell in love with the uniform," says Mary. "There's something about a nurse's uniform, you know. He just fell for the uniform." Anyone who has seen Mary, however, can tell you she could dress in burlap, and the boys would still fall for her.)

Hitoshi set siege to Mary's heart. There were places to stroll, even if you couldn't get any privacy in a parental "apartment." There was no movie where a couple could go and hold hands. There was no corner drug store where they could talk over a couple of malts. There was no privacy for lovers.

Mary didn't know. She couldn't make up her mind. Hitoshi was a handsome

guy, anybody would agree. But she just didn't know.

But Hitoshi was insistent. So finally Mary said "Maybe." That satisfied Hitoshi. Now all he had to do was get his parents' permission.

The caucasian may think that peculiar, but old customs had to be followed. And Hitoshi must ask his father.

Father Shosuke was traditionally cold. He would have to be convinced.

Mary Yamagata became the wife of Hitoshi Nitta eight months after they met. It was a very quiet, dignified, Christian ceremony, in Poston camp. Just a few friends and relatives were present. Some were the elders, born in Japan; some the youngsters, who had never seen Japan.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Hitoshi kissed Mary. There were giggles—giggles from the elders, and giggles from the youngsters. For this was an American show of affection. Japanese do not kiss in public. It was very shocking to see those modern, Americanized descendants kiss in front of others.

● ORGANIZING THE CAMP

The wedding meal, like all others, was eaten in the mess hall. By now there was a form of government in camp, and a form of community life. Fourteen barracks made up a block. Each block had its own mess hall, its own wash house. Block leaders were elected, and over them was a unit supervisor. Through these leaders and supervisors was contact maintained with the director of Poston, the big man in charge.

While mother Taka spent the days in routine housework, like so many of her neighbors, the menfolk continued their agricultural or road building pursuits. Neither Taka nor Mary could prepare the meals for their menfolk for which they are famous. They must eat in the community houses.

"I shall never eat pork again," Mary avows. "Pork—pork—nothing but pork. Because we raised it there, you see." Occasionally it was varied by beef, which was raised in some other relocation center, and came in exchange for Poston pork.)

The hospital where Mary worked was growing, but it was always crowded. Eventually, 250 persons could be accommodated there, but it was never large enough. The linen had to be sent nearly 200 miles away to be laundered. Sometimes patients went for two weeks without a change of linen on their beds. One day a camp laundry would solve this problem.

Life was monotonous and dull. There was little to do, and nobody had money from their \$12 to \$19 a month to spend for luxuries. Little by little this need was met.

● BASEBALL LEAGUES FORMED

Baseball diamonds were set up all over the camps. Leagues were formed.