

WE ARE ALL AMERICANS

Mrs. Tomoye Takahashi, who so graciously consented to an interview dealing with her internment experiences, shared many of her beautiful as well as grim memories of her past and our country's history, during our three hour conversation.

Prior to the relocation of Japanese Americans on the west coast of the United States, Mrs. Takahashi was employed by the Office of War Information. Her varied responsibilities dealt with listening to and identifying the languages of news reports on the progress of the Pacific War. Upon identifying any one of at least a half dozen languages, Mrs. Takahashi would then forward the segment for further translation. Mrs. Takahashi monitored the radio broadcasts from station KCBS in San Francisco. She not only worked in San Francisco, but was also borned and raised here. Her father arrived in San Francisco in 1901, at the age of 19.

With the acceleration and advancements of the axis powers throughout the world, as well as the changing political environment in the United States, the inevitability of some type of confrontation between Japan and the United States was set. Needless to say, this clash came

about with the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941.

The first Mrs. Takahashi and her family (she and her husband (married June 1941) lived with her parents) heard of the attack was in a gasoline station that Sunday morning. The attendant took longer than usual to come out and service the car. He was being informed of the recent events by his wife. He in turn told Mrs. Takahashi and her family. Upon hearing this, Mr. Takahashi stated that Japan had committed "national suicide". The feeling of disbelief set in and remained for days.

In this solemn hour we pledge our fullest cooperation to you, Mr. President, and to our country. There cannot be any question. There must be no doubt. We, in our hearts, are Americans-loyal to America. We must prove that to all of you.

Telegram to President Roosevelt, Dec. 7, 1941
from the Japanese American Citizens League.

From this point on, with the Declaration of War upon all axis powers, the build up to the forced evacuation could be seen. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, Mrs. Takahashi described the community environment as containing an enormous amount of tension. Then to complicate matters, more and more restrictive measures were announced. The establishment of curfews essentially limited to a very small area the travel of Japanese Americans. In essence, as Mrs. Takahashi said, "mobility was frozen".

In the spring of 1942 the Government of the United States began the removal and internment of 110,000 of its residents, two-thirds of them native born Americans. The "relocation", as it was called, applied to all citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry. These citizens and residents were not individually charged - rather they were collectively ordered to report for internment.

From Executive Order 9066, by Maisie and Richard Conrat.

Although some people may discriminate against me, I shall never become bitter or lose faith....I am firm in my belief that American sportsmanship and the attitude of fair play will judge citizenship and patriotism on the basis of action and achievement, and not on the basis of physical characteristics....

Creed of the Japanese American Citizens League, 1940

With the posting of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 5 on April Fools Day, April 1, 1942, persons of Japanese ancestry were informed of when their evacuation would occur. But, there was no information as to where the evacuees were to be sent. The only information given, as Mrs. Takahashi so vividly explained, was that one should expect cold winters and warm summers. In another words, be prepared to experience extreme weather fluctuations.

With this small amount of information, Mrs. Takahashi and her family ordered, sight unseen from mail order catalogs, clothing they believed would be useful. The reason for employing the use of catalogs was simple. With movement so restricted, there was no other way to shop.

Soon rumors began to fly throughout the community about the FBI coming in the middle of the night to take

individuals away. Also, the constant threat that the FBI would search one's house. Indeed, this rumor became reality for Mrs. Takahashi. Mrs. Takahashi, along with her family were ordered into the family kitchen while three FBI agents scrutinized the house and its contents. In the end, the agents took all items they could not understand, mostly Japanese brush painted figures. All the items confiscated were of personal value, while of little significance to others. Upon completing their search, the FBI agents escorted Mrs. Takahashi's father to their waiting car. Mrs. Takahashi requested to accompany her father to the bank where the agents were bound. At the bank, three blocks away, Mrs. Takahashi's father had a safe deposit box-of which the agents demanded to ^{know} the contents. During the brief ride, the siren was wailing the entire way. An obvious effort to make the occupants conspicuous as well as stir up hatred. "How do you think that looked" Mrs. Takahashi retorted. Upon arriving at the bank and opening the safe deposit box, all that was there was nothing except a handful of \$1000 and \$5000 war bonds.

I am an American. I have never known anything else. This evacuation can't change me because I am old enough and will always be the same.

Evacuee, quoted in Alexander Leighton,
The Governing of Men.

With the actual evacuation a mere seven days away (announced April 1, evacuation by Noon April 7, 1942) the proliferation of "skimmers" was almost unreal. Under the

guise of helping Japanese being evacuated, individuals would hold themselves out as "custodians" or "business consultants", or any other of the host of almost illegal representations. Attorneys had Japanese sign Power of Attorney agreements. The significance of which was unknown to the many who signed.

Soon Anglo friends would no longer be heard from. What few remained, one would hold onto "like straw in a river, if you cannot swim". Hate messages soon became a common occurrence. Many individuals, such as Mrs. Takahashi and her family had to sell items in their "evacuation sale" for only pennies on the dollar.

The Japanese Americans also suffered almost incalculable economic losses as a result of relocation. Forced to settle their affairs in a matter of days between notification and actual evacuation, they fell victim to financial opportunists who bought their property and possessions at prices far below market value.

From Executive Order 9066, by M. and R. Conrat

The first step of the evacuation process was the removal, by sections, of persons to an assembly center. The assembly center for this area was the Tanforan Race Track. Within days thousands of persons arrived at Tanforan by bus under the watchful eyes of soldiers with bayoneted weapons. Each person was conspicuously tagged- "a tag like merchandise has" Mrs. Takahashi calmly added.

Upon arrival at Tanforan, Mrs. Takahashi and her family were placed in a horse stall, still fresh with the stench of horse manure. This, a stall designed for a single horse

was to be home for five people for an indefinite period.

With the congregation of thousands at the race track within a short period, the inadequacies of the sanitation facilities became painfully evident. The simple luxury of toilet paper was no where to be had. Immediately after relating this indignity to me, Mrs. Takahashi stated that they "treated us like we were guilty and skimming". Then within the same breath she continued that there was "no precedence in history like this without an actual accusation".

Of the varied experiences Mrs. Takahashi lived while at Tanforan, none were more moving than the ordeal of helping with the birth of a fellow human being. The delivery table was a door taken off its hinges, covered with newspapers and wrapping paper. The woman's husband was along side her throughout the experience. Later, the same man, whose wife was forced to give birth in a horse stall, joined the United States Army.

Even as the internees lived behind barbed wire, an ironic footnote was being written by young Japanese American men in Europe and The Pacific. Japanese American soldiers served hazardous duty with specialized units like Merrill's Marauders, while others, serving as interpreters, provides probably the most important link in American intelligence. The 442nd Combat team, an all-Japanese American unit fighting in Italy and France, emerged with more casualties and more decorations than any other unit of comparable size and length of service in the Army's history.

From Executive Order 9066, by M. and R. Conrat

Stillwell led the way to the front porch where members of the Masuda family were waiting.... then General Stillwell's aide read the citation. It told how staff Sergeant Kazuo Masuda had walked through two hundred yards of enemy fire....it also told how he gave his life to save the lives of the men he was leading on a night patrol into heavily mined enemy territory.

"I've seen a good deal of the Nisei in service and never yet have I found one of them who didn't do his duty right up to the handle...." said Stillwell.

Then he pinned the medal on the soldier's thirty-four old sister...."In accepting this distinction for my brother" said Miss Masuda "I know that he would want me to say that he was only doing his duty as a soldier of our beloved country".

Los Angeles Times, December 9, 1945

The next and final step of the evacuation process entailed the movement from the assembly centers to the relocation centers. The relocation centers should be referred to as concentration camps, since they were complete with barbed wire and soldiers with bayonets Mrs. Takahashi proposed. For the vast majority of Bay area internees, they were relocated to the Central Utah Relocation Center. Later to be named Topaz by its members. Travel to the camp, located in the Great Sevier Desert(which is a geological lake bed)was by cattle car.

Upon arrival in Utah, Mrs. Takahashi repeated one of her first experiences. She, along with the group she had come with were greeted by an official of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The official walked up and down the center of the cattle car in silence. Then after a brief period he blurted out the question "do any of you

speaking English". The disbelief registered on Mrs. Takahashi's face soon was mirrored in mine.

Topaz looked so big, so enormous to us. It made me feel like an ant. Every place we go we cannot escape the dust....dust and more dust, dust everywhere.... I wonder who found this desert and why they put us in a place like this....

Young evacuee, quoted in Carey McWilliams, Prejudice

Within a matter of days it became obvious that the information earlier provided about the warm summers and cold winters, was a bit misleading. The environment of the desert enables day time temperatures to hover around 100 to 120 degrees, while during the evening hours of the same 24 hour period, water would freeze inside the bedroom Mrs. Takahashi slept in.

To compound the physical problems imposed by the camp, the quality and quantity of food available was appalling. A typical meal was comprised of three pieces of string beans, about 3/4 of an inch long, along with two slices of beets. The "meal" was served with a teaspoon so that all would receive equal amounts.

During the wait in line at the mess hall, which fed 500 persons, the standing in the heat for extended periods would become intolerable at times. In fact, Mrs. Takahashi passed out numerous times while waiting her turn for a few scraps of food. To this day she still experiences the falling of the "black curtain" as she calls it.

In the evening hours, after waitingⁱⁿ the customary

dinner line, many would retire to another's "home" for conversation- the main stay of entertainment. For example, Mrs. Takahashi and her family would enjoy the sharing of experiences, information and comments on issues of the day with their many neighbors.

Additionally, in order to enlarge the variety and availability of entertainment "everyone gave of themselves". Specifically, individuals with certain talents began to teach them to others. For example, drawing, calligraphy, music, ceramics, and tailoring. Even Samuri plays were worked and formed together from the memories of individuals. Again and again, "something was made out of nothing" as Mrs. Takahashi so plainly stated.

Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi perhaps "gave of themselves" more than the average internee. For Mr. Takahashi was responsible for the establishment and publication of the Topaz Times, a daily with a circulation of 10,000. Mrs. Takahashi became a regular columnist. She would interview various people and write their unique stories, "All of which were touching". One such story dealt with the hardships endured by a lonely, newly arrived Japanese in the early 1900's. The article ended with the sentence that the man would rise each morning and say to himself that "I come from the land of the morning sun" and then would cry.

In terms of the children interned at Topaz, Mrs. Takahashi's observations were interesting. She described

the interaction of the children. "The children had nothing to lose, they just made playmates--all were accepted at face value". Then Mrs. Takahashi juxtapositioned her childhood with that of the children she was seeing in her memory of the ~~children in the~~ camp. She related numerous childhood experiences that took place during the "Yellow Peril" period. While she calmly spoke one could see and feel the emotion within her. The plain game of jump rope was no fun since she was never able to jump, only turned the rope--despite the fact it was her rope.. Also the indignity of having manure thrown at one or being shot by a pea shooter loaded with pins rather than peas. All these events went unprotested since one did not wish to concern the teacher or parents. In fact, one never shared personal problems in youth, merely accepted all the abuse since "we were Japanese".

"The Yellow Peril" was a familiar threat to the far west and it antedated the immigration of the Japanese themselves. A century of anti-Japanese punctuated by outbursts of physical and civil violence, stood back of the Relocation Order of 1942.

From Executive Order 9066, by M. and R. Conrat

However, not all aspect of the camp were negative. When I requested Mrs. Takahashi to describe some of her more positive experiences she began with the adventure and privilege of shopping in the nearest town some 17 miles from the camp. Delta, a town of 200 and the size of one

block provided the mainstay of items not available in the camp. Each week, on a rotational basis, an individual would become the "shopper for the block" in which he or she lived. The towns people viewed the Japanese Americans with curiosity. This curiosity eventually ~~laid~~^{id} the foundation that enabled the occurrence of a basketball game between the towns people and the camp people. The high school basketball team ^{From Delta} was accompanied by two adults for each player. A very interesting event Mrs. Takahashi added quickly. The game occurred and despite the obvious disadvantage in both size and nutrition, the camp won by the lopsided score of 87-2. Mrs. Takahashi admitted that "we laughed just a bit".

Some of Mrs. Takahashi's other "misty memories" were not so joyful. Indeed, many were clearly painful to reveal. One such experience involved Mrs. Takahashi's need for milk. This need was due to the plain fact pregnant women require the nutrients and vitamins provided by a glass of milk. However, the camp authorities did not, or would not, see this need. Instead, they imposed a hard fast rule that only those who were less than 12 years old or older than 65 could receive milk passes (the pass entitled the holder to a 6 oz. at each meal). The ludicrous^{ness} of this rule was heightened at the end of each day when "The Chief" of the mess hall would dump leftover milk down the drain.

Then, Mrs. Takahashi spoke of one final memory that was common to all who experienced the camp. Each morning during

the flag raising ceremony, the entire camp would pay their respects by reciting the Pledge to the Flag. "We did not know what it stood for by the way we were treated" Mrs. Takahashi said in a matter-of-factly tone.

The truth is-as this deplorable experience proves-that constitutions and laws are not sufficient of themselves; they must be given life through implementation and strict enforcement. Despite the unequivocal language of the Constitution of the United States that the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, and despite the Fifth Amendment command that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of the law, both of these Constitutional safeguards were denied my military action under Executive Order 9066.

Tom C. Clark, Associate-Justice of the Supreme Court

Then as suddenly as the internees were evacuated, they were informed that they could return to their homes since victory of the allies over the axis powers was almost complete.

Mrs. Takahashi recalled this period without difficulty. Since there was "no place to go, but home, San Francisco, the same place that discriminated against us", she returned to the bay area.

Jobs were difficult to get by most during the post-war era, but the possibility of Japanese Americans in securing a job was nearly impossible. So the Takahashis began their own business with \$300 and little experience. Needless to say, all one has to do is look at anyone of their three stores today to see how events in their lives unveiled.

To a degree, I believe, the succes of the Takahasis

in the post war period was/is due to Mrs. Takahashi's
simple, yet all encompassing comment upon my exit from
her office- "I don't think about it much today(the internment).
I don't nurture any bitterness, who is there to get even
with. It would be unproductive".