

REMINISCENCES

Internment

40 years after the internment, I wrote an article "Japanese Americans in World War II - A Nisei Remembers" which was published in the New World Outlook in January 1982. The article is a very personal account of what happened to me and of my thoughts. I wrote in the article numerous accounts including the ironies of my being in the Exclusion Zone twice on mistakes, first by the draft board and then by the U.S. Army.

There was a national apology in 1990, 48 years after the evacuation and internment.

JAPANESE AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II —A NISEI REMEMBERS

ALICE KANE

I was a high school senior and the treasurer of the student body at Lincoln High School in Portland, Oregon, when Japan attacked the U.S. at Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941. Secure in my American citizenship and the self-knowledge of my loyalty to the U.S. I went to school on Monday. How else should I have reacted? To my classmates I was a fellow American. Most of the faculty had no reason to question my loyalty. However, the faculty adviser to the student body treasurer called in my assistant treasurer to counsel him that I would probably not be coming to school. He was no doubt astonished that not one Japanese-American student at Lincoln High stayed away from school. In retrospect most of the faculty were the exception and he reflected the emotional uncertainties of a good segment of the general population of the West Coast.

Our family was not unlike the many Japanese families of Portland, Oregon. My father came to the U.S. in 1906 at the age of 19 to work in the Pacific Northwest on the construction of railroads. My mother was his picture bride. She arrived in the U.S. in 1921, a few years before the Oriental Exclusion Act. My mother's father had come earlier to the U.S. also. He too had worked on the railroads, but in Colorado. He rose to be a section chief, saved his earnings over several years and went back to Japan to his family. He saw the opportunity for young immigrants who were willing to work at the job of building the American West and he set in motion through a marriage arranger the marriage of my mother eventually to my father. To stay in the U.S. and raise a family was a weighty decision for my father since he was the first son. He was to inherit his father's land and to carry on the traditional family responsibilities. However, following the marriage, he decided with

my mother that he would give over to his younger brother the rights to his father's land and that henceforth they would become part of the American West. In 1941 the median age group of the first generation, *issei*, in Oregon, Washington, California, and Arizona was 45-49 years. Their children's median age was in the 15-19 year group. There were some old enough to be in the U.S. Army, few in colleges, many in high schools and many in elementary schools. The *niseis* of Oregon were a few years younger than those in California. Restrictive covenants, job discriminations, restaurants refusing to serve Orientals and other racially motivated mistreatments plus their problems with the English language prevented the *isseis* from becoming integrated into the general American community. Most of the *niseis* were very young and few were breaking down racial barriers. This largely explains why when the 9:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. curfew was announced by the Attorney General to apply to "alien enemies and to all Japanese" on February 4, 1942 there was little challenge on constitutional grounds by those of us who were citizens of the U.S.

The Commanding General of the Western Defense Command (Lt. Gen. J. L. DeWitt) did one better by making the curfew hours from 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. The Public Proclamation No. 3 by the Commanding General referred specifically to alien enemies and "all other persons of Japanese ancestry." The proclamation required that at all other times we were to be at our places of residences or employment and were permitted to travel between those places and also to any point within a distance of not more than five miles from the place of residence. Alien enemies included by definition all Japanese, German, and Italian aliens. All other persons of

German and Italian ancestry were not included.

When we were evacuated under the Executive Order No. 9066 there was also little challenge. There were few college graduates among us. We dutifully limited ourselves to one suitcase per person and reported to the assembly center when told to do so in the first leg of the evacuation process.

Some things that occurred in the evacuation defied logic. I reached draft age when I was in the North Portland Assembly Center which had been hastily built out of the Livestock Exposition Building. There, behind the barbed wire enclosure, many of us registered, although at the time there was no drafting of Japanese-Americans into the services. What was even more ironic was the presence of the *nisei* captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps placed in the assembly center like the rest of us. Hysteria was running very high, especially at the headquarters of the Western Defense Command. Even at our young age we could not help but think that General DeWitt was some kind of a nut.

I was a senior looking forward to my graduation. I had been elected an assistant treasurer in my junior year and had succeeded to be the treasurer in the senior year. I was in the running for the T. T. Davis Award, the coveted prize named after a former principal that went to the graduating student who had excelled academically and was active in student activities. Six weeks before the end of the school year we reported to the assembly center. I completed my last six weeks of school in the center and graduated from the high school named after the Great Emancipator in absentia with honors and I was awarded the T. T. Davis Award. Oh, how I wanted to attend the graduation and how I wanted to attend the dinner given annually by the Portland newspaper,



Japanese Americans board trains for a relocation camp.

The Oregon Journal, to honor students who had had a high school record of straight E's. I asked for permission, but the officials said, "No." Yet, when the officials in an effort to keep the morale of the young people up permitted a dance to be held in the hall of the assembly center, they placed a truck and a driver at my disposal to go to the flower shop for which I had worked after school in previous years to borrow palms for decorations. I was able to go out of the stock yards twice for palms (probably with some trepidations by the officials.) For me, the feeling of "getting out" was exhilarating.

The War Relocation Authority camps were not ready for some months. We stayed at the North Portland Assembly Center through the heat and humidity of Portland's summer. In September, 1942 we were herded into trains and headed to Minidoka near Twin Falls, Idaho. At the assembly center I worked in the pantry and was paid \$12.00 per month; in Minidoka I helped clear areas for vegetable gardens for the camp. Later I worked in a block kitchen as an apprentice cook with people who had been chefs and first cooks in clubs and fancy restaurants before the evacuation. We were all paid \$16.00 per month. None of us of

our age wanted to stay in camp. When an opportunity came a group of nine in the age span of 18 to 22 got leave from the camp to help in the sugar beet harvest in Utah since manpower shortage in the agricultural sector was especially acute. We returned to camp when the beet harvest season was over.

In the spring I applied for admission to the University of Idaho, Southern Branch, in Pocatello (now Idaho State University) and was accepted. I had two merit scholarships which paid tuition and there was a little cash for expenses. I was also able to get a job that paid room and board. That was a God-send since there was very little in my savings and my parents had lost heavily in disposing of their property when the evacuation order came. I spent one semester at "Pokie".

Just before I left for college the War Department thought better of excluding Japanese-Americans from entering the U.S. Army. The War Department would not, however, draft Japanese-Americans. They would need to volunteer. And so, while I was in Pocatello, I wrote to my Portland, Oregon draft board to volunteer. At the same time I took an examination to qualify for the Army Specialized Training Program, if and when I got into the Army. After the school semes-

ter was over I did not want to go back to Minidoka and so went to Weiser, Idaho, to pick peas. There a letter from the draft board caught up with me instructing me to report for induction into the U.S. Army at the center in Portland, Oregon. There was little time since the letter had to catch up with me. I was puzzled. Portland, Oregon, was in the exclusion area covered under the Civilian Exclusion Order. As a Japanese-American I was not permitted to be in Portland. Yet, an induction order to report was a specific order not to be taken lightly. "What the heck," I said, and took the train from Weiser to Portland. There was absolutely no problem. The ticket clerk sold me a ticket and no one questioned me the entire trip. This was not difficult to understand. Most people are not able to tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese. Chinese were free to come and go and Japanese had all been evacuated.

I reported to the induction center only to learn that the draft board had erred. It was supposed to have made arrangements for me to report outside the Exclusion Area. The induction center, therefore, sent me to my draft board, and when I got there and told the clerk who I was, her jaw dropped. "How, who, what..." she sputtered. Quick long distance calls and local

calls were made, travel orders were cut, rail tickets were purchased and she had me leaving that evening by Pullman to Salt Lake City to the induction center there. I assured her that I could get to the rail depot on my own. She did, however, arrange a vehicle to pick me up at the depot in Salt Lake City.

I had never before travelled in such elegance. And this was war time. They not only paid the ticket but also gave me an allowance for meals. There was, however, considerable time between my business with the draft board and train time. What was she going to do with me in the interim? She asked if I wanted to sit there in the draft board office until time to leave for the depot. I declined. I wanted to go around town to see it for I had been away from it for some months. I wanted to see friends, especially those at the flower shop of my former employer. She saw me leave the office hoping that nothing would happen to me and that I would be on the train. I had an enjoyable afternoon in the Exclusion Area on my draft board.

Through another error I was in the Exclusion Area a second time. After induction at Salt Lake City and a pre-active service furlough at Minidoka, I reported to Camp Shelby, Mississippi where the Japanese-American 442nd Combat Team was being trained. However, since I had qualified for the Army Specialized Training Program, I was transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia, into a basic training unit for college bound soldiers. After the basic training the ASTP soldiers were assigned to colleges and my assignment came up for the University of San Francisco. I didn't object. I was sure it was a mistake, but who was I to question the U.S. Army in its wisdom. The University of San Francisco was delightful and the area around it was pleasant. I don't think it was the First Sergeant who caught the Army's mistake. It was probably the colonel commanding the unit who noted me in the ranks. After all, at 5'-1" I was always in the front row of the platoon. My stay in San Francisco was a brief two weeks but it was fall and it was lovely.

My orders were cut to transfer me to New Mexico State College and Mechanics Arts in Las Cruces where my stay was somewhat longer. U.S. fortunes in Europe took a turn and we, ASTP soldiers, were transferred to line units en masse, trained, and sent to Europe. Three campaigns, including

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A grandfather and his grandchildren prepare to leave their home.

the Battle of the Bulge, and a period of occupation later, I found myself returning to the U.S., honorably discharged and picking up my civilian life again starting in Portland, Oregon. My parents had returned there from Minidoka when the WRA camp closed and the government allowed them to go their own way.

Thinking people have often asked me whether I am bitter over the experience. They have often added that I have a right to be. My answer has been that I don't feel bitter over the fact that I have had to prove to my fellow Americans that I am a loyal citizen. That has been done and I believe the price I paid was not as great as that

paid by some others. My service connected disability is minor and three years of war time service during World War II were not uncommon to men of my age.

As I grow older there are many things about the evacuation that have faded from my memory. I, however, still remember the ironies and also the kindnesses of the few who believed in us. The rest seems now like a bad dream of many years ago. ■

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