

TESTIMONY FOR THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND
INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS--Paul M. Nagano

Date: July 29, 1981

Paul M. Nagano
Paul M. Nagano

I'm Paul Makoto Nagano. I appreciate this opportunity to share with you some of my feelings and experiences related to the Executive Order 9066.

By way of background, my grandfather is reputed to be the first immigrant from Japan to settle in Canada. It was in May 1877. My father was educated in Canada, and moved to California in 1914. Although my mother is from Japan, since my father was a second-generation, we were acculturated as Americans and English was the predominant language in our home. Thus, I would consider myself a Sansei; perhaps one of the oldest Sanseis around, except for my two older brothers.

Although my grandfather was a successful businessman, owning three Oriental Art stores in Victoria, Canada, my father has a history of struggle as he left Canada for the United States. Although my father could not become a citizen until the sixties, he was a very patriotic to the United States. I remember how he would decorate the front of our home with the American flag on every national holiday. When my brother Jack K. Nagano was drafted into the U.S. Army, my father and mother were very proud. For our family, the curfew restrictions with the subsequent Executive Order 9066, was most traumatic, not so much resulting from the loss of property, but the sense of betrayal and futility. I felt that the country that I have always consider my country did not want me--that I was a citizen without a country.

At the time prior to the evacuation, I was a senior at Chapman College, then located outside the stipulated zone. Because I had a Japanese name and face, I had to get special permission to go to college. My Chinese friends wore a badge with the words "I'm Chinese."

As a twenty-one years, college senior, I had two churches which I begun, one in Torrance, California; and the other in Wilmington, California. With the cooperation of Dr. Miles Northrup, then pastor of the First Baptist Church of Torrance, we baptized eighty-five young converts from these two churches. The evacuation order was enforced, I was at a loss whether to go with the young converts to Jerome, Arkansas, or go with my family to Poston, Arizona. I finally decided to go with my family to Poston, Arizona.

The psychological affect of registering was truly traumatic for my father. He seem to lose his rational capacities and was a picture of discouragement and futility. With one brother in the U.S. Army, my other brother, my father, mother, and I, packed up enough of our belongings; sold or gave away what was left, and made our way to the Santa Fe Depot, headed for Poston, Arizona. It was a very sad day when the creaky, coal-stove, troop train made its way out of Los Angeles for the Arizona desert.

The transition from civilian life to that of a prisoner was shocking. As soon as we transferred from the train to the bus in Parker, Arizona, armed guards pointed their guns at us. I felt that I was a prisoner of war. What did I do? What did my family do? What was this world coming to?

After about 45 minutes, we got our first glimpse of Poston I. The barracks were not completed. We were assigned rooms. Canvas bags were issued to each one of us. I went to the fire break where there was a bail of hay to fill my canvas bag. A canvas folding bed was issued; blankets were pinned up to separate our family from the Mizumoto family--seven of us in a room, 20 x 21 feet. I'm certain, because of my faith in God, and my desire to keep up the morale of others, I was able to adjust to this shocking experience.

It was a hard decision for me, as I volunteered for the 442nd Regimental Combat Unit as a chaplain. I was later disqualified because I was not seminary trained; although I was ordained into the American Baptist ministry. For those who quietly left camp as volunteers, I met with them and prayed with them before they left the camp.

My diploma from Chapman College was sent to me in absentia. Later, I was to receive my seminary diploma in absentia due to the emergency of resettlement on the West Coast. At that time, to participate in a graduation exercise was especially meaningful, since we placed a great deal of emphasis on education and we went to college at great sacrifice.

One of the most disappointing experiences came to our family, when my brother, Jack, having finished the Military Intelligence School at Camp Savage, Minnesota, was not permitted to visit us in camp on his way overseas. With the possibility of not seeing him again, it was a hard blow not to see him once more, especially when he was one of the early graduates of the G-2 school and the Pacific theatre was still very precarious.

I was married in camp, and left the next day to attend the Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. It wasn't an elaborate wedding, and my wife's graduation ring served well as a wedding band. It was a difficult psychological adjustment leaving camp. With fear and trembling, my new bride and I made our way to a new life, a hard life, in a strange land.

Later, when I had the opportunity to work for my doctorate, I chose as my thesis, The Japanese American Search for Identity, Ethnic Pluralism, and Permanent Identity. It was a psychological-social search to discover who I was.