

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO

THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

Seattle, Washington - September 10, 1981

By
Kara Kondo
[REDACTED]
Yakima, Wa. 98901

My name is Kara Matsushita Kondo. My home is in Yakima, Washington. I am a native of the Yakima Valley. My father Yasutaro Matsushita settled there in 1905. Most of my pre WW II years were spent in Wapato. We returned to the Valley in late 1945.

By now you will have received and heard hundreds of personal evacuation and internment related testimonies. My own personal account would not differ widely from the outpouring of the humiliating, tragic experiences. I was old enough to assume responsibility as head of household; for seeing that our family carried out the edicts of Executive Order 9066.

I am foregoing a personal testimony in behalf of a brief background of what happened to the Japanese families in Yakima Valley so that it will be on record with your Commission. Most will be submitted as a written report. This is a particularly busy harvest time for the Valley farmers. It would have been difficult for most to expend the time necessary for the preliminary activities prior to appearing before this Commission. Moreover, Many of us have yet to come to terms with our evacuation experience. It is difficult to talk about it.

I wish to conclude by reading an account of our entrainment to the Assembly Center. This was written in 1943. It is a belated tribute to the special Military Intelligent contingent sent to process us before evacuation and who helped make those last terrible and trying days bearable.

For those unfamiliar with the demographics of the area, Yakima Valley is located in south central Washington, about 150 miles east from the Puget Sound, across the Cascade Range, in a semi-arid terrain, now agriculturally rich because of irrigation. It is mainly known for its apples, hops, soft fruits and wide range of diversified crops. Supreme Court Justice William Douglas is also a Yakima product. (I'm afraid he was not helpful insofar as the Evacuation/Internment Court cases were concerned.)

The Japanese began to settle in the area before the turn of the century, coming first as agricultural contract laborers. Many stayed on because of the

Valley's rich potential, and the ease in which they, as aliens, were able to begin farming on a shoestring on the Yakima Indian Reservation. The Bureau of Indian Affairs leased land directly to the Issei farmers. Many cleared virgin sagebrush land and pioneered a diversified cropping pattern of vegetables and melons.

Diversification came about out of necessity with the passage of Washington State Alien Land Law in 1921 when direct leasing of reservation land was curtailed. Deprived of their livelihood, many families moved out of the area. Others survived by sub-leasing. This was a more expensive operation because land was first leased by a U.S. citizen who sub-leased it to Japanese farmers. Sub-leasing became a lucrative practice for some caucasians.

Because of added costs, farms became smaller. Ingenious and enterprising farmers turned to many new crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, squash, peppers, melons, etc., which netted more dollars per acre than the alfalfa, grain or potatoes grown before.

As enterprising, I am told, was introduction of the "mobile" home-- long before construction of trailers, the forerunners of mobile homes. Since most leased Indian land did not provide living quarters, or only limited dwellings, the Japanese families often built one-room facilities which could be moved from lease to lease. When the family grew, another room was constructed to add to the rest.

As the children, the Nisei came, and more people settled in, the Yakima Valley Japanese community population increased to around 1500 or more in the early 1930s. A viable, active support system sprang up--Japanese Association, two ethnic churches, Japanese Language school, and numerous business establishments. Some catered to the white population were in Yakima. Those in Wapato were clustered in a section known as "Japanese town" and served the growing Japanese population.

We had our own social, athletic, and religious activities; a thriving sub-culture, a community within a community. The size of the Japanese population was small enough so that everyone know each other. There was a distinct feeling of being a part of an extended family. Outside contacts were mainly with other Japanese communities in the Northwest through athletic competitions and church conferences.

Urged on by their parents, the Nisei excelled in public schools. There were numerous valedictorians, salut^{ta}orians and "among the top tens" since the first Nisei was graduated from Wapato High School in 1924. Nisei students

usually attended Japanese Language school following a full stint at the public school. They never got into trouble with the law, worked hard on farms or in the family business. They went on to an university or college and gradually discovered that jobs commensurate with their education were closed to them. This is a picture repeated many times over in pre WW II Japanese communities up and down the West Coast.

The Yakima Valley Japanese community weathered periodic waves of racial discrimination, beginning as early as 1907, when Japanese Northern Pacific railroad track workers were attacked in Wapato by a group of white hoodlums. Planned anti-Japanese activity to drive out Japanese farmers from the Yakima Reservation was known to have taken place in 1917 in Toppenish. Undoubtedly those involved contributed substantially to the passage of Washington State's Alien Land Law in 1921.

With "American First" as a slogan, the anti-Japanese activity continued for several years to pressure curtailment of direct leasing of reservation land to alien Japanese. Shortly after this wave subsided, came the depression which hit everyone, and led to rampant unemployment.

By this time the Filipinos had immigrated to the U.S. and into the Valley. Many were employed by Japanese farmers. An outbreak of racial violence re-occurred in 1932 and 1933. This time it included both the Filipino workers purported to have taken away jobs from whites, and their Japanese employers. During March and April 1933, six homes or farm facilities were fired or dynamited. Although there was no loss of lives or serious injury, several haystacks, trucks, and green houses were destroyed or damaged. Our front porch was scorched by a fire torch. It threw the Japanese farmers and Filipino workers into a panic. Eventually four whites were arrested as suspects.

With this kind of anti-Japanese activity prevalent during the many years the Japanese had settled in Yakima Valley, it should not have been a surprise that order to evacuate finally came to this inland, non-strategic area. But surprise it was, and incomprehensible as well.

Removed from the west coast by 150 miles or so, fairly isolated, agricultural, we were led to believe that evacuation would not take place. True, our Japanese community leaders were picked up immediately following Pearl Harbor, and all aliens had to register. Travel and curfew orders trickled down to affect us, but we were told to continue all other normal activity. Indeed, all farmers were urged to enlarge their operations; to contribute to the war effort. This they did, even though rumors persisted that the area would be evacuated.

Adding credence to non-evacuation possibilities was an influx of some Japanese families from Seattle who relocated a business or two in Yakima and Wapato, or joined other family members who lived in the Valley.

That spring, the Japanese farmers worked harder than ever, as if the evacuation edict could be stayed by their performance. Diligently and lovingly they tended the growing things. Perhaps deep down they were saying farewell to the land that nurtured them and the only life they knew.

Noticeable was the steadily growing hostility of the community as a whole. In the groundswell that called for removal of the Japanese, it became difficult to distinguish who were friend or foe. It was a dangerous time for loyal friends to speak up. However, two unexpected friends of the Japanese, Esther Boyd and Dan McDonald, volunteered to testify before the House of Representatives Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, known as the Tolan Committee on March 1, 1942 in Seattle. Both were highly respected members of the business and farming communities who were later subjected to various forms of insults and violence for their acts of courage and invaluable assistance to the evacuating families.

Acts of violence surfaced again in early 1942. The Japanese Association building was set afire. It housed the Japanese Language school and up to a short time before, was the living quarters for Mrs. Hatsue Fukuda and her daughter. She had stayed on as the language school teacher after the death of her husband in 1941. Mr. and Mrs. Tokichi Fukuda had come to Wapato in 1931 to take charge of the Wapato Japanese Language school.

A few weeks later another fire was discovered in a storage shed near the complex that was known as "Japanese Town". Fortunately, the fire was discovered before it could spread to the frame structures standing side by side, housing three grocery stores, a restaurant and garage. Two of the stores contained rooming facilities on the second floor, almost fully occupied at that time.

By April and May informal orders came down and processes set up for disposition of property. Battered automobiles with out of state licenses roamed the country roads eyeing and seeking out farms for their choosing.

Faced with the hard realities of evacuation, Japanese families agonized over finding buyers for both real and personal property, for leases of their reservation farms; what and where to store items, what to throw away, what to take, how to live while all activity took place. Rumors fed upon rumors. Where would we go? What was happening to those already in camps? By the time the formal Notice for Exclusion and Instructions No. 98, from Gen. DeWitt, dated May 27, 1942, finally came, it was anti-climactic. We no longer had the will

to question the necessity for declaring non-strategic Yakima Valley a Military Zone, or why the orders came so late.

We dutifully complied with the directives for reporting the the Wapato Junior High School gymnasium on May 31, 1942 to receive further instructions for our removal.

- - -

ENTRAINMENT - June 6, 1942

Now that all the passengers were in the coaches, I no longer had an excuse for remaining outside to help the red-headed Corporal pronounce the Japanese names as families boarded the train.

I looked around. The crowd had grown. People in twos and threes, or huddled in small crowds greeting each other or talking among themselves. Others walked up and down the length of the 11 coaches searching for friends for some last goodbyes. A curious atmosphere prevailed. The murmur of voices seemed muted. The air was electric with expectancy. The crowd had the appearance of spectators a circus waiting for the show to begin.

Sgt. Joe was apparently in charge. He walked up with two other G.I.s, Nick, who looked distinctly Italian, and big, blond Germanic appearing Pete. They were members of the special military intelligence who came from Fort Lewis to process the evacuees. They were responsible for overseeing compliance of Exclusion Order 98, that covered much of central Washington State.

They had worked with the Japanese families since May 31st, preparing them for boarding the train that would take them from their Yakima Valley homes. Their job was nearly over. Another military contingent had just come in that day to ride on the trains to escort the evacuees to the Portland Assembly Center.

Some of us helped at the process center and we got to know members of the force quite well. They had been professional, cheerful, helpful and kind at all times.

Joe clutched a sheaf of paper, rolling and unrolling it. He looked worried. Was he worried about the escorting GIs? I was. Earlier when we approached one of the coaches, we heard scuffling and thuds and sounds of a fight. A disheveled soldier was forcefully evicted from the car.

"Oh the guys who came in today were given a few hours leave before train time, and they got drunk." was the explanation. What was ahead of us? For the first time, I was truly afraid.

CWRIC/Kondo

"Well", said Joe, "It won't be long now, will it?" I wanted to know what the fight was about, and what to expect during our overnight train ride to the Portland Center. "What really happened back there?" I asked. The four GIs looked uncomfortable and angry.

"Don't worry--no one will bother you. We made that plain to them, by God!" I was somewhat reassured.

"Where is Nathan? I thought he would be here until the bitter end." I said. We all laughed. The antics of Staff Sgt. Nathan Miller, Jewish, former tracher from Brooklym, had become a joke at the Wartime Civilian Control Station. He was the comic relief that made the trying experience bearable.

His buffoonery, I knew, was a cover-up. On the second day of registration Sgt. Miller asked me to go outside for a short walk. The first thing he said as we were out of earshot of the people milling around the station was,

"Why are you letting them do this to you?!" "What do you mean?"

"...taking you away and putting into camps."

He saw the bewilderment and incomprehension in my face. What was he saying? He's here to see that we go. He's Army. It was the Army who declared that the Japanese must be evacuated. I must have laughed.

He glared and was deadly serious as he began. "This is no laughing matter. We're trained to assess people and situations; to make judgments on subversives. I see nothing, absolutely nothing that justifies this evacuation. When we go into a community, we check police records, go to school to check on student, and make every assessment as to the nature and character of the people we have to deal with. We find noting! The Japanese students are tops in their classes. Citizenship is flawless. We couldn't find any delinquency. There's nothing on the police records...Why are you letting them do this to you!"

I was speechless. If he didn't know, what answer could I give? Many a night when I was finally alone, I had wept over the same question..Why? Not so much that it was happening to me, but that it was happening at all.

(This episode both haunted and upheld me through the years. The memory was especially poignant was I viewed one of the first confiscated, then classified, film taken at the German Concentration Camp, Dauchau, at a private showing to employees of the Louisville Courier-Journal in 1945)

"Nathan had to stand guard. He was madder'n hell." Pete remarked. I tried to think of something light and amusing to say, but my throat was dry and tight. The sun was setting. It was almost time for the train to pull out. I could hear the steam engine puffing and chugging.

"Well, I'd best get aboard, I don't want to be left behind." Only awkward silence. The remark fell flat.

Joe rolled and unrolled the papers. He smacked his palm with the roll and blurted vehemently, "Damn! I know why you're going. I've been talking with a bunch of these so-called citizens around here. Talk about a bunch of narrow-minded SOB's. They tell us, "You've got quite a job. You boys are doing a great job of getting the Japs out of here." I'm from New Jersey. Maybe I've never seen a Japanese, or maybe I don't know'em, but by God, we've been around enough people. We can tell who's ok, and who's not!"

His voice rose. I looked around uneasily at the surging crowd.

"Thanks Joe. And thank all of you for making it easier during our last days. I really must get on."

"Thank us...that's a laugh! Honestly, this wasn't OUR idea. But it sure was an interesting experience. Good luck!"

The red-headed Corporal helped me up the steps of my coach. "Thanks a lot for helping me out."

"Don't mention it. I really wanted to stay on the ground as long as I could."

He smiled and nodded. I knew he understood.