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Testimony of: Yoshihiko Tanabe

My name is Yoshihiko Tanabe. I live on and operate a farm in Fife, Washington, on the same land which my parents began farming some 60 years ago.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was attending University of Washington. Suddenly, on a weekend soon after that attack, my father was arrested by the F.B.I. for what reason I still do not know. When the two F.B.I. agents came to the house, they questioned the whole family about concealed contraband and intimidated us with their questioning. It was like a nightmare. We, my mother, brothers and sisters were bewildered and frightened - shocked that our government would think that our father would do or say anything that was harmful to our country. We couldn't believe what was happening. The agents gave my father half an hour to gather his clothes and then took him away. It was two years later that they finally released my father and we were reunited again - in the concentration camp in Idaho.

When they arrested my father, I had no choice, as the eldest of six brothers and sisters, but to drop out of school and take care of the farm. But not for long! The second shock came when orders came that we would have thirty days in which to settle our affairs and be moved out of the West Coast.

What to do with the farm? Fortunately (we thought) a family from Oklahoma came looking for a place to farm, and I made arrangements for the family to take over the farm for the duration. About 5 acres were in crop when we were told of evacuation. When we left our farm on May 14, 1942, to be placed in the temporary assembly center in the Puyallup Fairgrounds, the lettuce crop was about to be harvested. The Farm Security Agency made a very low estimate of what our cost involved in putting in the crop was, not what the crop would bring on the market, and that was what we were paid. We were in no position to negotiate with the agency and we accepted what we were given - again, we were intimidated by authority!

Our Caucasian friend drove us to the assembly center, taking with us only clothing and bare necessities. Our family of seven spent the next three months in a one-room barrack-like construction which afforded no privacy. The walls separating the rooms were so thin that we could hear what was going on in adjoining rooms.

In August, we were moved to Minidoka, Idaho, a camp erected in the middle of sagebrush country in southern Idaho. When we arrived, the camp was still under construction and the crews were working the clock around. My first impressions were "hot," "dusty," "confusion." We were assigned two rooms with bunks to sleep on - no chairs or tables. We made our own furniture from scrap lumber. Windows had no curtains and rooms were heated with one pot belly coal stove. Life from then on was "line up and wait" whatever we did.

My first job in camp was swamper on a truck that delivered bedding to the new arrivals. Following this, I took a job as a stove mechanic, a farm machinery mechanic and as a movie house operator. I was paid $16 or $19 per month depending on the skill involved. During the summer, group of us were recruited to help harvest sugar beets, potatoes and onions in nearby farms.

During the second year, my father was finally released and joined us in Minidoka. My plans for education were abandoned since I would have to return to Fife when the war ended and operate the farm in order to sustain the family.

In 1945, the war with Japan ended and we were told we could return to Fife. Our friend in Fife brought our truck so we could load our belongings and leave the camp. The trip home was one of dread and uncertainty and made more difficult by gas stations that would not sell us gas, by restaurants that would not serve us. But, we made it home! Our first reaction when we reached the farm was how rundown the place was. The house was filthy as if it were never cleaned. The floors were damaged from wood being chopped indoors. Outside, the field was overrun with weeds - the whole place showed total neglect. It would take years to bring the farm back to what it once was.

When we arrived home, our financial status was nil. But merchants in Fife with whom we traded for years before the war, loaned us fertilizer, seed, etc., to get started again.

Marketing our first crop was another problem we encountered due to the anti-Japanese feelings which still existed. We had to sneak our vegetables into the produce when no one was around. Fortunately there were few sympathetic buyers to help us out. It was two years before we were once again accepted by the produce houses. In all, it was a struggle for six or seven years, before the farm was fully restored from the three years neglect.

Because of the World War II incarceration, our family lost four to six years' income from the farm; we were deprived of our father for two years; and my younger brothers and sisters were deprived the benefit of a full education which they would have received under the public school system.

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Yoshihiko Tanabe