

July 31, 1981

TO: COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS  
726 Jackson Place N.W.  
Washington D.C.

FROM: Betty Y. Okura

[REDACTED]  
Seattle, Washington 98118

Re: Pre-evacuation, camp life and post camp

Madame Chairperson and members of the Commission;

I am Betty Okura, a registered nurse, having received license to practice in the state of Colorado in 1946 and in the state of Washington in 1947. As of April 1, 1980, retired from nursing from Harborview Medical Center, Operating Room Department. Age 62 years old.

So that our children, grandchildren and generations to come of also other various ethnic groups may not go thru the experiences we encountered following December 7, 1941,--I share with you these experiences as it happened to me and other members of the Masamori Sato family.

We were a family of eight, farming in Sumner, Washington. Father was 56 years old. Mother 43. I as the oldest of six was 22. John 20, was a junior at the University of Washington. Bessie 18, was a first year nursing student in Tacoma, Washington. Robert 16, junior in high school. Rose 14, a ninth grader and Frank 12, a seventh grader..

December 7th, 1941 started out as any farming day for that time of the year. We had planted Rockhill everbearing strawberries all day so were not aware of the day's happening until evening. What a terrible feeling that was! Suddenly the happy secure home was no longer there.

Each Following days, we heard of some issei father being taken away by the FBI and wondered on what charges they were being held. Was it justifiable? Some were people we knew. Our father informed us, he as alien may also be taken, although he was not aware of having done any wrong. This we all believed, for had he not always told us, he had

picked the best country to live in. ( Ust to tell us we could even become the president of the USA) Our hearts were heavy with worry wonderinf what was to become of us. Although we all spoke and understood the Japanese language, it was inadequate for expressing our feelings. We kept it to ourselves,--we shed our tears alone and I asked God to help us understand, to keep us together and to guide us.

John came home at the end of winter quarter. Bessie was to have her education interrupted later in the spring. The younger three came home from school each day with unhappiness and worry written all over their faces. We were to leave less than a month (May 14, 1942) before the school year ended.

Every day events began to point towards evacuation of Japanese from the coast. In my belief that my country would not (we were citizens) evacuate us, I mentally started to formulate plans so John and I could somehow manage the farm and keep us together, should our parents be taken. How naive I was!

But finally EO9066 came out, although an American citizen, we were of the wrong color skin, hair and eyes! To me a day never to be forgotten, one of utter despair and of being unwanted by my country! How could this country, MY COUNTRY do this to me? This was the only country I knew. If it had not been for one of our neighbors, the Kilborns, at that point in my life, don't think I could have weathered the following days. Slowly the idealist in me turned to reality and preparations for evacuation were begun. During all this time, December thru spring, farming went on. Father thought this would be best. His logic to us was that produce would be needed regardless of whether we would be there to harvest it. In retrospect, it kept us very busy and occupied for a great part of the day. So with heavy hearts, crops were planted and life went on.

To prepare for evacuation, our assets on the farm had to be liquidated, if we were to have ant funds to start with when the current crisis was over. Farm land was leased, however considerable sum had been invested in building two large rhubarb houses, converting a cattle shed into a third rhubarb house and building a large greenhouse and cold frames. Besides these assets, there were the usual equipments of operating a farm and an inventory of supplies. Together with the folks, John and



I, an inventory was done and a price figure arrived at. A young Filipino man who had worked for us previously came to buy the assets and take over the farm. However he would not even consider father's price. He very bluntly told us to sell to him at his price, since we would have to leave it anyway! You can imagine how upset we were. For father, this was especially distressing. The young man had worked for us several years when first arriving from the Phillipine Island. He had shown him details regarding farming. Father became very depressed, with the increasing problems of evacuation. So much that, he seriously considered just leaving everything before giving in to him. I can remember how upset I was. The injustice of the whole thing,-- for the first time in my life, didn't sleep that night, because of my anger. We couldn't let the folks throw away their lifetime assets on the farm! There was something that could be done. The FARM SECURITY AGENCY office in Tacoma could help! John and I went to see them and received the necessary information and forms. The mechanics of filing an availability of farm with its crops, equipment and supplies were carried out. (Records from that filing have since been destroyed and are unable for proof) John's letter of March 1, 1981 states, "All I remember is that we thought we got so very little, but I don't remember any amounts." After the filing we were matched with a family looking for a farm and a sale was made. Check was received before going to camp.

A few of the furnitures, such as beds, chest of drawers, one daveno and chair besides some kitchen utensils were stored in the attic of our landlord's home. Space was limiting factor in not being able to store all our possessions. Other furnishings of the home were left with the new family for a small sum. (Midwest family with 6 small children, escaping the drought stricken area to try farming.)

Our business matters were taken care of, Mr. Gregory of Seattle First National Bank in Puyallup given Power of Attorney. Father had done business with him for many years.

Puyallup JACL during that time provided support and help for many families needing assistance with evacuation. Since curfew was enforced, activities had to be within the hours allowed. (Forgot time)

On May 14, 1942, we arrived at Puyallup Assembly Center, Camp Harmony, area B with our baggage, which was one luggage apiece and bedding.

Our living space was one room for the seven of us. Bessie was in the Nurses' quarters in the hospital area. Our single beds, army cots with straw filled mattresses, were lined up next to each other with very little space between. I remember later loading all of us on the back of our truck and going the five miles distance to the south of us from Sumner. It was a grim trip, wondering if we were to ever see the valley again. For some reason, I drove the truck back to Sumner and was brought back by one of the neighbors. We did not see Bessie too often, as going from one area to another was not easily done.

It was not easy to adjust to having lost privacy from one's own family and from others. Bathroom and bathing facilities were all on a community system. Eating was in the mess halls. Families began eating with their friends and no longer ate as a family. Sometimes these conditions gave rise to lesser parental control.

Adjusting to being behind barbed wires with soldiers standing in the high towers was difficult. Many were not much older than I. I wondered if they ever gave thoughts to us as Americans like they, placed in concentration camps with no trials, nor convictions,--just the wrong ethnic background. Did they think this was justified?? If it were not for friends who came to see us (in Puyallup) to show their concern for us, our days would have been much more depressing. In camp, we supported each other in our problems of adjustment.

Later in the same year, we were moved to the Minidoka area, Twin Falls, Idaho. I think they found the dirtiest and oldest train for that trip. We found ourselves in the middle of southern Idaho, on a railroad siding, in the midst of sagebrush country. From there we were transported to camp. We were located in block #19, the seven of us again in one room. This time the room was somewhat larger than Puyallup, but still inadequate for seven. With no vegetation in the newly constructed areas, the sand storms posed problems. Sand sifted into the room everywhere, thru cracks in the walls, from around windows and doors. At times it was necessary to place dampened hankies or towels over our nose and mouth. Children with asthmatic problems and allergies had difficult moments.

That winter, weather was extremely severe compared to the Northwest. It was bitterly cold and together with the winds, added much trib-



ill(not sick enough for hospitalization) food had to be brought in from the mess hall and were usually not appealing for them. That winter there were many illnesses, due to change in environment and living accomodations. There was much flu that winter. Children and the elderly seemed to have the greatest problems. Pediatric ward on #10 was full of little ones with diarrhea and consequent problems and further problem by faulty plumbing in the hastily constructed hospital. Because of the weather, the elderly with circulatory problems had their share of troubles too.

Shortly after arrival in Minidoka, applied for nurses' aide work.I was accepted. After a series of orientation, we were placed on the hospital wards. Pay scale I believe was; \$12.00 for unskilled, 16.00 skilled and \$19.00/month for professional. I received \$12.00/mo. to start with a raise to next step prior to my leaving for school. As the fall weather turned to winter, it became increasingly difficult to get to and from work nineteen blocks away. Finally an ambulance pick up for staff was instituted. We all worked long hours many times . We worked hard. Eventually I was to move next to the hospital area, which relieved the congestion at home by one.

Early in the spring of 1943, started to write to various nursing schools for admittance into their program. Many negative responses were received. They ranged from. "We would like to consider you, however due to community feelings, it is advisable not to admit you at this time." to " We are not accepting anyone of Japanese ancestry." Finally was accepted by the Sisters of Charity, Glockner-Penrose Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Classes started at Seton School of Nursing July 1,1943. I left Minidoka, July 26,1943.

John shortly after arriving in Minidoka, started working as a ware-houseman and continued until the following spring 1943, at which time he volunteered into the army. He left first part of May and was to eventually go overseas in the Pacific Theater assigned to the Air Force Intelligence.

Bessie too, also had some difficulty getting acceptance into a nursing school. She left sometime during the first winter for St. Marys Hospital, Rochester, Minnesota. While in camp, she had worked as a student nurse. To this day, I have a very soft spot in my heart for

the Catholic sisters who took Bessie and I into nursing, when others were afraid to do so.

Bob finished his last year in high school with the first graduating senior class at Hunt high school in Minidoka. Somewhere shortly after graduation June 1943, he went into the army, and eventually became part of the 442nd. (Since he is giving oral testimony, will not further mention him)

Rose and Frank were coping with camp life and wondering what was to become of them, since for the first time in their lives, we had become such a fragmented family.

Mother found work in the hospital laundry and although she had considerable difficulty adjusting to the hard floors did amazingly well. At least the socializing with other people and working kept her busy.

Father had some health problems develop and was hospitalized for a short duration. After some months of inactivity, he worked as an ambulance driver, from which he left sometime ? early 1944 to work on a turkey ranch outside of Minidoka in Jerome, Idaho. Because of lack of housing accommodations, father went alone. He felt strongly about getting out to get started again. It was very hard for everyone to bear these developments in their lives. Besides that, the folks knew John and Bob would soon be going overseas. They were under great stress.

Sometime later, after John and Bob had been to Idaho to see the folks, a possible tragic event was averted. A service man coming home from the Pacific discovered there was an issei with a flock of turkeys out in the sagebrush away from town. He was organizing a tarring and feathering of father, fortunately this was discovered by his employer. Father was brought into town until the crisis blew over. At that time the information was withheld from us for fear of worrying us. They certainly did not want their sons overseas to know about it. I did receive this information at school through another source shortly afterwards. The two service stars proudly hanging in father's trailer would not have meant anything to the young man with such terrible intentions.



The educational picture for the two youngest members of the family posed another problem, as school in Minidoka was scheduled to close fall of 1945. So once again, they were uprooted to a strange community in Minnesota. For the school year '45-46, Frank lived with Bessie while attending school. ( Bessie had just finished and had gotten an apartment) While attending school, Frank worked at odd jobs to meet miscellaneous expenses. Rose , by then in her senior year, worked as a school girl, and finished school. For a fifteen and a seventeen year old, who had spent the last few years in an isolated area, this was a frightening experience for them. Also a worrisome period for us all, coupled together with John and Bob overseas. After the school year, they were able to join the folks in Twin Falls, Idaho, where Frank finished his last year from Twin Falls, Idaho.

After the two youngest left for Minnesota, mother was able to get employment from father's employer and soon joined him in Jerome. She also took care of a flock of turkeys, a flock being about 5 to 7,000. They were located within sight of each other in the sagebrush country, but it was still a walk to go and eat together. It's a wonder they didn't meet a rattler unexpectedly! For they were there! They each lived in a very small trailer house under very primitive conditions. Their groceries and water were brought in when turkey feed was brought out. It was very hard for me to accept my parents having to live in such a manner. Fortunately John discharged in February of 1946, a month later was able to relocate parents to Twin Falls, to a migrant workers camp, a great improvement in living conditions. There the family worked in the fields and warehouses while making plans for returning to the Pacific Northwest.

As for me, July 1943 found me in a community of Colorado Springs, Colo. starting nurses training. We were the first two of Japanese descent to ever be accepted by the school. Both of us were from the NW. The school was to accept four more six months later, to a total of fifteen niseis within the three year period. At first we were received curiously, quietly and with reservations. We incurred no open hostility and soon were engrossed in studies and clinical experiences. Some of my patients had never met nor seen anyone of Japanese descent. They certainly had warped ideas about us, which were straightened out. They obviously had not been aware that the United States was made up of people from many ethnic backgrounds. At any rate it was a very

Professionally, over the years, did not meet with any direct discrimination from patients or co-workers. Although at times, felt there was an undercurrent but never a refusal to have me as their nurse nor to work with me or under me. I made sure that my competency could not be challenged.

This is not to say that I have not had episodes of racial discrimination. One occurrence shortly after finishing training is directed towards a nationally known large insurance firm. Several of us had decided to spend part of our first paycheck towards starting an insurance program. We investigated and decided on one particular company and paid our premiums, only to have mine returned later. I was informed the company did not insure anyone of Japanese descent! Nothing was mentioned about this matter during the time, we were looking into the matter. I felt used very much, since I was the one who had instigated this project.

My second episode happened after returning to Tacoma, Washington where I was employed at Tacoma General Hospital. A Caucasian nurse friend I decided to rent an apartment together. We spent one day cleaning the unit before moving in. The first day, returning from work, was told to move out. They claimed they didn't know I was a Jap! Even the fact that I was an American, that my two brothers had been in the service did not help. Guess in those days, I was still not aggressive enough! This happened either late in 1947 or early in 1948. Housing seems to be the problem area periodically. Twice, when a home has been purchased, the real estate person had inquired of the neighborhood if we would be acceptable. I still object to this as I feel I have every right to purchase a home where I wish.

The last incident occurred in my applying for commission into the Army Nurse Corp, sometime in the winter of '49-50. A Caucasian nurse and I applied. She was to shortly receive her commission. At that time, nurses in the Mobile Surgical Units were needed badly in the Korean front. Because we were operating room nurses, felt a patriotic sense to do our part.. I was not to receive my commission for almost eighteen months(6/15/51) and told the delay was due to FBI clearance. (I had already had one clearance when I left for school from camp) At any rate felt better qualified with more experience than my friend. By the time, the commission was received the current crisis was over



and I stayed on reserve status with the 359th General Hospital unit of Tacoma.

By 1948, the family were all back in the Pacific Northwest area. Some of us had finished our education, while others were still in the process of striving for their education. For the parents, a home was purchased with a small acreage which provided some income for them. They also worked part of the time on a neighboring farm. They were to live there for another twenty years, during which time they became United States citizens. For the last six and nine years of their lives, they were to spend it in Seattle with me. Father lived to be 92 years old, passed away April 8, 1978. Mother passed away in 1975 at the age of 78 years old. Despite the injustices, heartaches, discriminations and the hardships of the years past, we were able to look ahead and plan for the future.

In concluding, I would like to make these requests of the Commission.

1. I want for us to be recognized as AMERICANS! of the first class order! A Presidential apology to each interned together with compensation. A full disclosure to the public of the events leading to EO9066 and subsequent events.

2. That history and social study textbooks used in all schools of the nation be updated to include all the details transpired to effect EO9066 and its consequences.

3. Even though no monetary compensation would be big enough for the terrible injustice done, the sum of \$25,000.00 for each year spent in camp would be acceptable.

Respectfully submitted,

*Betty Y. Okura*  
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