

Jiro and Shea Aoki

Seattle, Wa 98144

Jiro is retired. Shea is also retired but works part-time as a tailor.

My father came to the US in 1903 at the age of 17. He was not happy in Japan and he wanted to explore America. He worked as a cook for the Coast Guard. In time, he had many businesses in Seattle- a pool hall, the Atlas Theatre, (now the Kokusai), and some hotels. He brought his wife from Japan and they both worked very hard in the businesses. So we have old roots in Seattle.

I was born in 1911, and my older brother, Taro, in 1910. Another sister was born in Japan when my mother went back for a short visit. My mother was having a very hard time because she had to care for my older brother who was ill and he needed special services and schools which were very expensive. He developed a progressive blindness which was a stigma at the time and caused my parents great anguish. My mother also felt very isolated because there were few Japanese around and she spoke no English.

Shea was born in Portland. Her father died when she graduated from high school, so she and her brothers had to go to work. After marriage to Jiro, she lived in Seattle with him and helped run the 2 hotels which was the family business. She had one pregnancy and lost the baby. Due to the doctor's neglect, she didn't have corrective surgery at the time and was to suffer great pain for 2 years while in the camps.

At the outbreak of the war, my father was 78 years old. He was immediately taken into custody by immigration authorities, because he was considered to be a community leader. As far as we know, what they held against him was his active membership in the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, a philanthropic organization which cared for people in distress. That's what it says in FBI records.

We lost both hotels when we were sent into the Puyallup center. We got almost nothing for them.

I went from the Puyallup center to the immigration place in Seattle to act as a translator for my father. He had been held there for 4 months. They asked questions like: "Did you have Japanese flags displayed in the Nippon Hall when they had their program?" My father said no. "Did you give your oath of allegiance to Japan?" My father said no, we were going to stay in the US until his death. Many similar questions were asked.

My father was very depressed. He was a very conscientious, sensitive man and he was almost suicidal at that time. He asked how they could do such a thing to him. He was not allowed to join us for a year. When he came to Minidoka, he was a broken man and died shortly after the war. After many years as an independent businessman, he felt useless, having lost his self-confidence because of his incarceration.

In the Minidoka camp, living conditions were very poor. 7 persons were put in one room, members of 3 families. My father was in poor health and Shea also was suffering from not having had proper repair work done when she lost her baby. The tar paper barracks were drafty and because there were no ceilings but open spaces over the whole barrack, we could hear what was going on in all 4 rooms of the barrack, so we had absolutely no privacy. We slept on straw filled canvas bags and used orange crates for dressers. Bathroom facilities and eating were done communally in messhalls and latrines. It wasn't the right kind of place for anyone to live in, in the US.

I had a job as supervisor of the Social Recreation Department in Minidoka. Pay rates were bad: \$14 to \$19 a month. I later went out to work by day in the beetfields on nearby farms, getting 50¢ an hour. It was hard work for me because I had always been a businessman with hotels to manage.

After 2 years, we left camp and lived in Twin Falls, Idaho where I worked on an apple orchard. We lived in a small, broken down cottage and things were pretty hard. Shea by that time had had minor surgery



done and she was able to have our daughter.

In 1945, we returned to Seattle to pick up our lives. The only job I could find was at N&S Iron Foundry, where I was injured by a piece of metal falling on my head. So I left that and we managed to buy a dry cleaning establishment, Broadway Cleaners. We owned it for 28 years until I had a stroke.

We tell our story because we don't want anything like this to happen to anyone else. We are not bitter, but we did lose alot because of the government's action. As Christians, we have faith in Jesus Christ, which has sustained us in our times of trouble.

We feel that redress to individuals is the only way that we can make sure it doesn't happen to other people. This way, we can donate what we want to whatever we wish to support, on an individual basis.

*Jiri Aake  
Phyllis Aake*