

GUEST COMMENTARY by Keith McCoy

We old-timers miss the once popular feature of our weekly newspapers -- the 20 - 40 - 60 year ago column. If that were still a feature The Enterprise would undoubtedly mention that it was just 60 years ago that our Japanese-American neighbors were commanded by Executive Order No. 9066 to report to the assembly point at the Portland stockyards for transport to one of ten detention camps in the western states. Some 120,000 of their ethnic group suffered this indignity.

While some Japanese community leaders and a few suspected of espionage were whisked away shortly after Pearl Harbor, all family members had to leave on a designated date, taking with them only such personal effects as they could carry themselves in suitcases and bags. Most would be gone for three years.

I did not personally feel the full trauma of this event as it related to my several Japanese friends. I was already off to the war and preoccupied with my training in the U.S. Navy.

But I did feel the full shock of it when I more recently read the book "Stubborn Twig" by Lauren Kessler, a University of Oregon professor. It describes what happened in the Hood River Valley before, during and after the war. The general feeling there against those of Japanese ancestry was so pervasive and vicious that many did not return to the valley at war's end.

In 1999 Janus Y. Kurahara of Hood River published his autobiography entitled "Ganbatte." It is an inspiring story of how a determined Japanese-American created a meaningful and productive life in spite of the many roadblocks he encountered because of his race.

One part of his book reveals long-concealed public records relating to Hood River County's general suspicion of the Japanese. As early as 1937 the then-current Sheriff deputized and paid a large number of white residents to spy on their Japanese neighbors.

This has captured the attention of the Smithsonian Institution. On May 5, 2002 Jan Kurahara was asked to read from his book and



lecture at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. as part of a Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.

Quite a different mind-set prevailed on the Washington side of the Columbia. The Japanese-American families living in White Salmon, Bingen, Dallesport and Maryhill were not perceived by their neighbors as posing the same espionage and sabotage threat as they were in the Hood River section.

As one example, George Kida and his parents, Kenjiro and Kay, who operated a 700 acre farm in the Mountain Brook district out Snowden way received much support by their neighbors. In fact, 67 neighbors and local businessmen signed a petition attesting to the Kida's unquestioned loyalty in an attempt to keep them from incarceration. It was to no avail.

Though they suffered the indignity of the concentration camp years, they were far more fortunate than many of their Japanese counterparts. Some of the same caring neighbors took care of their land so that they returned to their property that had not been neglected, vandalized or robbed.

Four of the Japanese truck gardeners at Dallesport were similarly aided by John Dickey of Dickey Farms so that they, too, returned to productive farms.

Sixty years ago the term "ethnic profiling" was not yet in vogue. But maybe, just maybe, this recall of long past injustices will help us avoid similar errors today.