

Japanese Americans

survived

hard times

BY BOB STORY

Executive Order 9066 drastically changed the lives of the Harry Uchida family of Wapato and the lives of thousands of other Japanese Americans.

The tragic ordeal began a few months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. Executive Order 9066 was issued, ordering all persons of Japanese ancestry living in the Yakima Valley to leave the area and be evacuated to a relocation camp in Wyoming.

Harry Uchida, born in Japan, emigrated to the United States in 1912, like many of the thousands of Japanese who came to America at the turn of the century looking for a better way of life.

After living in the Seattle area where Uchida trained to become an auto mechanic and professional driver, he moved to Wapato in 1918. He quickly established a small auto repair shop and began doing commercial hauling for local farmers.

Uchida's wife died and he returned to Japan, where a short time later he remarried and moved back to the Wapato area. He reopened his auto mechanics business, but in addition, turned to farming as a sideline.

That was during the 1930s, and Uchida's life and the lives of his family began to prosper and grow. That is, until the bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred and the American government decided all persons of Japanese ancestry living in this country were a threat to the national security.

"Back then," said Tom Uchida, one of six brothers in the Uchida household, "you just didn't question what the government told you to do."

So with little fanfare the Uchida family and the other Japanese American

families living in and around Wapato boarded a train in late May or early June of 1942 and were transported to Portland, Ore.

Tom Uchida, who now runs a 160-acre farming operation to the west of Wapato with his brothers Akira and Mas, explained that the site the government chose for the uprooted families to live for three months was nothing more than a horse barn.

"Our family was taken to Portland," said Uchida. "We were given a space about 20-foot by 20-foot to live in."

"I remember them giving each of us a denim bag and telling us to go to a straw pile and fill the bags up so we'd have a mattress."

The stay in Portland for the Uchida family and all the others was for three months, but the relocation camp in Heart Mountain, Wyo. where the government then sent the Japanese American families was to be home for them all until August of 1945, an almost three-year stint in the temporary living quarters.

After the relocation centers were closed, only a small percentage of the original 1,200 residents returned to the Yakima Valley. The Uchida family was among the few former residents who hesitantly trickled back into the Valley.

Personal belongings, real estate and everything they owned before being evacuated to the camps was lost.

"When we had to leave for the camps we only got to take what we could carry," said Uchida.

Returning home in late 1945, the Uchida met with unbelievable hostility.

"No Japs Wanted" signs appeared in many of the Wapato stores and businesses. "Yeah, there was quite a bit of prejudice and discrimination when the

families came back to Wapato," said Uchida.

The Wapato farmer is quick to point out, though, that most of the people he remembered as friends before departing town were the first to welcome him back into the Valley.

Housing for the returning Japanese Americans in Wapato was at a low, so the Uchida family moved to Sunnyside temporarily. "We moved into some federal housing there. There wasn't any place in Wapato to live," said Uchida.

Soon after, housing opened up a bit and the Uchidas returned to Wapato. It wasn't but a few years before Tom and his two brothers decided to become truck farmers.

Like others who gradually found farms to rent and begin anew, the Uchida brothers started with virtually nothing and have scratched out a life that, with much diligence, has led to a comfortable lifestyle.

Vegetables of all sorts were the primary crops the Uchida brothers raised when they got into the agricultural business, although these days vegetables don't count for much the income generated on the Uchida farm.

"We grow mostly apples, but we have some cherries and grapes now," explained Uchida.

In all, the Uchidas farm about 160 acres to the west of Wapato. That the three brothers took up farming, in itself, is kind of strange.

"My oldest brother, Mas, went to a mechanics' school and my other brother, Akie, went to a body fender school," laughed Uchida.

The various changes in the farming game from when the Uchidas first got into the business are too numerous to

name. But Uchida is quick to note that farmers have it much tougher these days.

"Back then when we first got started farming, you might not make any money, but at least you still were living on your place."

"Nowadays it seems you can go broke awfully fast and be put off the land," explained Uchida.

But, it's highly unlikely he or his brothers will be put off their land again. The three of them overcame the seemingly unfair actions of the American government in 1942, and have proved they know how to work hard to get what they want.

The indignation of being evacuated to a World War II relocation camp, "... is something that should never have happened to begin with," said Uchida.

"It's not so much that I think about that period in my life all the time, because I don't like to dwell on it. But it's like the Americans who went to Vietnam. They don't like to talk about the time they spent over there, but it'll always be with them, and I guess it's the same way for me," he explained.

Asked if he thought anything similar to the 1942 evacuations could ever occur in the United States again, Uchida said a person has to wonder if it might not be a possibility.

"You know, when the Iranian deal was happening overseas, there was some talk at the time about rounding up the Iranians living in this country."

"It scares the hell out of you when you think about it in those terms," said Uchida.

"People need to be educated about what happened in 1942. That's the only way for it not to happen again," he said.