

Valley Japanese relocation was dark interlude

This is the 49th in a year-long series of stories about people, famous and forgotten, who helped make the Yakima Valley what it is.

The events of December 7, 1941, came with a special kind of shock to 1,200 residents of the Yakima Valley — the Japanese community.

They were centered in the Wapato and Reservation areas, but quite a few lived in Yakima and others were scattered from one end of the Valley to the other. Some were Issei (Japanese-born), but perhaps more were Nisei — American born of Japanese parentage.

Though the older ones clung to old-country traditions and their native language, all considered themselves Americans and the younger generation was thoroughly Americanized.

No one knew what the result of the sudden plunge into war would mean, but an undercurrent of anti-Japanese feeling was evident at once. It grew as time went on and as the early months of the war proved disastrous for American forces in the Pacific.

Americans with as much as one-quarter Japanese blood were required to register and restrictions were placed on their movements. Soon an 8 p.m. curfew was in effect and travel was limited to very short distances.

The Japanese always had been restricted by the fact that they could not become citizens. State laws in 1921 and 1923 prohibited alien land ownership and Japanese-American farmers could not lease Reservation land directly, only through Caucasian intermediaries. Sub-leases could be costly.

Though they tended to form a separate community, the Japanese-Americans were respected by their neighbors as hardworking farmers. They were especially successful as truck gardeners. Some owned businesses, including several small hotels in Yakima. A laundry, grocery stores and a recreation center were among their other Valley business holdings.

The Japanese had come to the Yakima Valley around the turn of the century, when Mr. and Mrs. Oka took up farming in the Selah-Naches area. About the same time, the Ishikawa brothers were the first of many



They Knew Our Valley

By Maurie Helland

to settle near Wapato. Ginzo Ogata came to the Sunnyside-Outlook area about 1900, and soon afterward Kihshiro Sakai led a group of about 40 men from Hawaii to work in the Satus Nursery. Many of these later became farmers around Toppenish.

By 1915 there were nearly 500 Japanese in the vicinity of Wapato. The Japanese grew a variety of crops in the Valley, mainly on the Reservation. They were among the pioneers in growing potatoes and onions on a commercial scale.

A "first" of another kind was an automobile trek — the first recorded — from the Yakima Valley to Yellowstone Park in the early 1920s. The Japanese-Americans so impressed the park rangers that they were given a royal welcome.

As the second generation of Japanese grew up, education became an ever more important part of their lives. Wapato High School graduated its first Japanese-American in the class of 1924. Kikuye Otani was valedictorian.

In school the Nisei had been accepted by their classmates, used to a diversity of races. Pearl Harbor was the beginning of the end of that acceptance.

Everyone knew that even more stringent laws to control Japanese-Americans were coming. At hearings of the House committee investigating defense migration, held in Seattle and Portland in February and March, 1942, two Yakima Valley Caucasians spoke out on behalf of their Japanese-American neighbors. They did so at the risk of severe criticism at home.

Mrs. Winfield Boyd of Yakima, owner of a hardware store in Wapato, characterized the many Japanese she had known as "good citizens, hardworking, thrifty and law-abiding — anxious to contribute to national and community enter-

prises and to do charitable work."

"Records show," she said, "that the Japanese students are very bright and industrious. There is almost no juvenile delinquency among them."

Emphasizing their skill as farmers, Mrs. Boyd said: "If these Japanese are evacuated it would take, I should judge, at least four white farmers to raise the same amount of truck crops as one Japanese farmer."

"I think it is a mistake and unnecessary to evacuate the Japanese," Mrs. Boyd concluded.

Dan McDonald, a rancher on the Reservation, seconded Mrs. Boyd's observations about the skill of the Japanese as truck gardeners and the urgent need for their services. The Japanese, he said, produced 70 per cent of the tomatoes in the Valley and for others to take their place "would take years of experience."

"I have had pretty close contact with them for years," McDonald said, "and I consider them loyal."

The hearing did not change the course of events. Evacuation of all the Japanese and part-Japanese from all the Pacific coastal area was ordered. In Washington, this area extended to the Columbia River and included all of the Yakima Valley.

Given a limited time to settle their affairs, most Japanese suffered serious losses. Those farmers operating on leased land lost virtually everything.

Two special trains picked up the Yakima Valley Japanese on June 5 and 6. The trains pulled in at night. The cars were old and in poor condition. "They must have been taken out of mothballs for the occasion," said Mrs. Tak Kondo, one of those evacuated.

Quite a few people were at the station, some to bid goodbye and show their support and sympathy, some merely curiosity-seekers or those who were glad to see the Japanese leave.

"The hardest was to notice those who DIDN'T come," Mrs. Kondo said — "those you thought were your friends."

The troops in charge of escorting the Japanese were courteous and even sympathetic, Mrs. Kondo recalls. "One Jewish sergeant from New York said to me: 'Why do you let them DO this to you?'"

The Valley Japanese were taken first to Portland, to the Livestock Exposition grounds, where an evacuation center had been set up. While they were there an order came in for a number of young men to work in the Idaho sugarbeet fields (outside the "danger zone"), where help was urgently needed. The rest were transported to Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Colorado, one of the installations which have been called "American concentration camps."

Elaine Ishigo, a California artist who has written and illustrated a book about the camp, described her first glimpse:

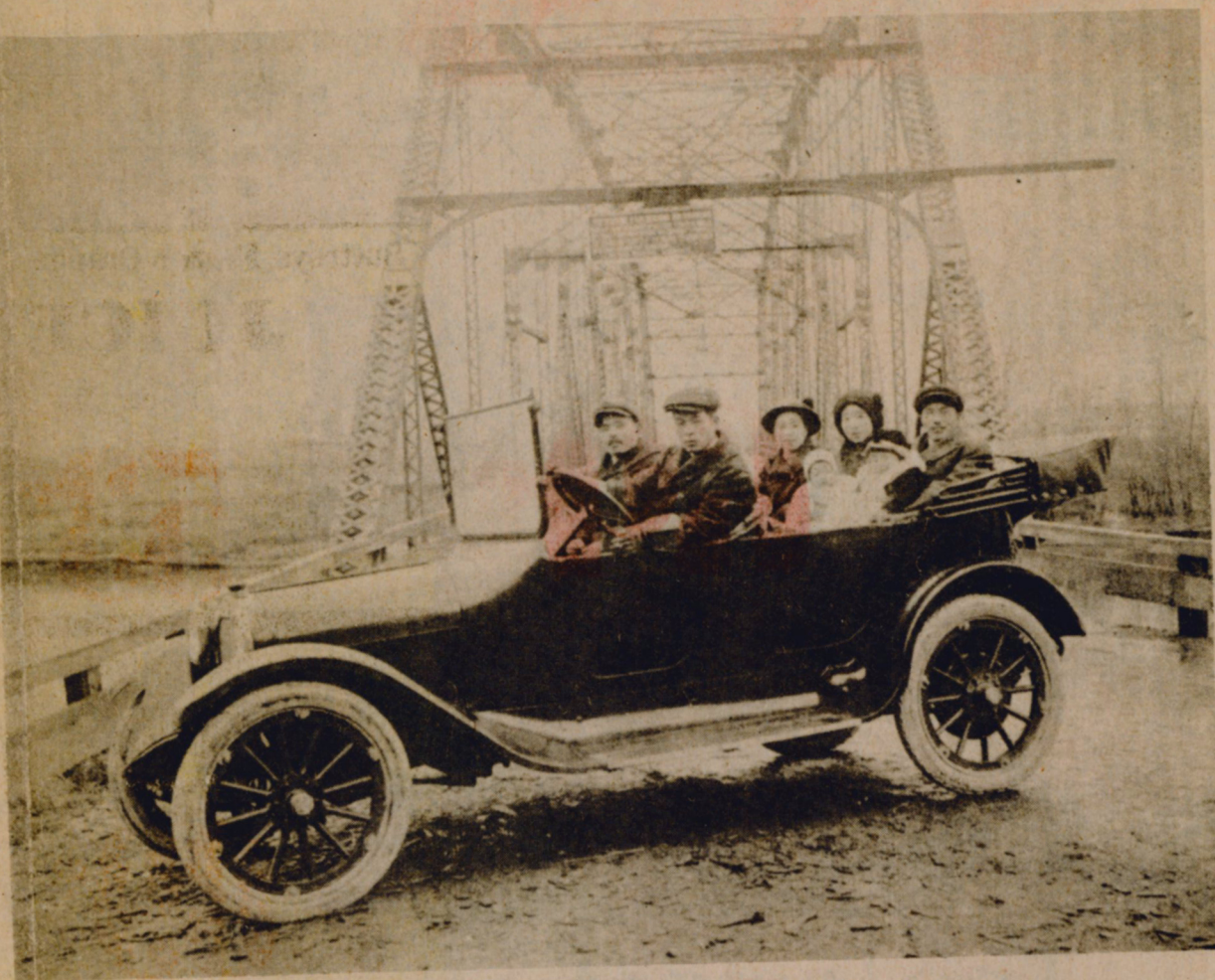
"In the distance a row of barracks stood in cactus-covered sand, on ancient weirdly jagged wasteland that spread far into the wide horizon. There lay the camp at the foot of a lonely mountain.

"There were tall watchtowers along the road for a mile, with barbed wire stretched between. Sheltering our eyes from the stinging sand, we strained to see through clouds of dust as we were driven through the camp to our barracks rooms."

The barracks were divided by 8-foot partitions into rooms, one to a family. Each held "a coal stove, cots, two blankets and a bucket and broom — nothing more. A great din of voices rose over the partitions separating the families.

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TORAKICHI OKANO, DRIVER . . . Matsushita family in back seat. Car pictured in front of Wapato-Donald Bridge, 1916. (From "Profile: Yakima Valley Japanese Community, 1973")

"There were hundreds of barracks in a mile-square inclosure," Miss Ishigo went on. "We went out that first night into the wind, wandering over rough terrain to locate the buildings with latrines where we could get water. Some looked for a friend or relative and lost their way."

Next morning, Miss Ishigo reported, men, women and children could be seen looking for scraps of wood so they could make some chairs and tables for their empty rooms. Scrap wood, carefully hoarded also provided materials to build a bathtub for the men in one part of the camp.

"Food, warmth and cleanliness depended on our ingenuity in using our supplies," Miss Ishigo said.

The internees showed amazing ingenuity and fortitude in adapting to the conditions at camp, even when snow swirled through the barracks streets, beginning in September.

The camp became a city in the wilderness with its own school, social and entertainment events and other cooperative activities. When spring came, nothing could keep the internees from planting gardens — a symbol of something to hope for.

As the war went on, restrictions were eased and many of the Japanese internees were permitted to move to other sections of the country away from the coasts. Midwestern colleges invited young Japanese students to register.

Some of the young men enlisted in Nisei units.

At war's end came the decision: Go back to the Yakima Valley or find a new life and a new home?

First several families drifted back, testing the mood of the people, the chances for rebuilding a life. Some stayed, some moved on. Not more than 10 per cent of the Japanese who

lived in the Yakima Valley before the wartime internment have returned to make the Valley their home again.

The reaction to those returning was often hostile, particularly in the Wapato area, where "No Japs Wanted" signs were not uncommon in stores and business places. Only one of the Yakima Japanese families returned, and only for a few years.

Former Valley Japanese are scattered from coast to coast. Three who are doctors practice in Maine, Louisiana and Ohio. Others now live in Chicago, Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay area.

In 1973 a great number of former Yakima Valley Japanese came back for a reunion in Yakima. It was a great time for reminiscences. To many it seemed like coming "home" — but not quite the same home they had known.