

Ousted by 'military necessity'

Japanese-American internment uprooted Valley lives, livelihoods

EDITOR'S NOTE: Fifty years ago, President Roosevelt signed an executive order calling for the internment of thousands of Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent. In a two-part series starting today, the Herald-Republic takes a look back at the people from the Yakima Valley who had their families uprooted and their lives forever altered.

By **AUTUMN ALEXANDER**
Of the Herald-Republic

Like a hoe falling with a thud upon tender shoots, Executive Order 9066 severed lives from the land of the Yakima Valley in 1942. Japanese immigrants and their American-born children, who for decades beat back the sagebrush and coaxed crops out of the desert, were ripped out of their homes as if they were weeds.

The order, signed 50 years ago on Feb. 19, 1942, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the name of "military necessity," called for the removal of all alien Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent from the West Coast in the wake of declaring war on Japan. As a result of that order, more than 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, spent part of World War II incarcerated in camps.

But the drama began here the night Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan, Dec. 7, 1941.

Twenty-four-year-old Fumi Ono was in bed, as were her parents and brothers and sisters on their rented 80-acre farm near Wapato. Suddenly, out of the dark and through the family's open doors came FBI agents, accompanied by local men from the American Legion. As her father groped in the dark to light the oil stove, Ono remembers shaking in her sheets, feigning sleep as one of the legionnaires barked orders.

"Now Frank, you, you sit right there or you're going to get in trouble," she recalls the townsman saying. The men tore through the little house, searching desks and closets. Ono, the oldest daughter, had a pen pal in Hawaii. All their correspondence was confiscated, but oddly, a picture of the emperor and empress of Japan went untouched.

Her father, first-born in his family, had left Japan more than 35 years before, winning hard-fought permission to leave his parents to seek his fortune in the land "where money grew on trees," Ono says. Eventually settling to raise row crops

and a family on subleased Indian land in the Valley, her father became a leader in the sprouting Japanese community near Wapato.

Frank Ono, who legally changed his first name from Kinichi to Frank, headed the Japanese-American school PTA and was a mover and shaker in the Japanese Methodist Church. The immigrant generation called themselves the Issei. The first generation of American-born children referred to themselves as the Nisei.

The Ono children were all born in Wapato, growing up as honor students in the public schools with close friends among their Caucasian classmates. Frank and his wife refused the dual citizenship available to their four sons and two daughters from Japan. Though American law would not allow them to become American citizens, they wanted their children to be purely American.

Without a word of explanation, the father was taken that December night and thrown in the county jail along with five or six other Japanese community leaders from Wapato. No charges were filed. In the ensuing weeks, Ono and the family went to see him but weren't allowed to really talk to him, she says.

On Christmas Day, the Ono family and the Methodist Church people fixed turkey with all the trimmings for the prisoners. But when they went

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YAKIMA HERALD REPUBLIC

Local History

(Staff photo by Gordon King)



TOP: Herb and Fumi Iseri were just married when they were ordered to the Wapato train depot for deportation to Oregon.
LEFT: In front of the Wapato Buddhist church, Japanese-Americans are photographed on May 24, 1942, a day of deportation.

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Letters to the Editor

We, Japanese evacuees of this valley, are extending our hands in farewell to all our faithful friends, who have done their part in making our departure from all our life's work less miserable. We feel that the government proclamation of evacuating the Japanese is not a means of unnecessary discomforts but a protection to the Japanese for the unseen dangers. We are not leaving with anger in our hearts toward our friends but with the thought that we are facing an unavoidable issue, which is for the good of all. We hope this war will be over very soon and we will be reunited with our American friends and be able to work more closely together to carry on with the spirit which we have treasured for many years.

It seems a shame all our plans have been postponed for a short time, but when we realize what it means to bear our share of the sacrifices we are proud to do it. We know we are giving up all we have gained over a period of years of hard labor but we are glad to sacrifice to assure our Victory. We also know our American friends we leave behind will have to sacrifice; it is this sacrifice we good Americans share that will build an indivisible nation. We know these sacrifices to be great, but there is much more we have to share, and we will be glad that we have done our part to keep our country under the Stars and Stripes.

We extend our gracious thanks to those in the office and those appointed by the government who patiently aided us in completing our preparation for this evacuation.

Sincerely,
VALLEY EVACUEES.

Wapato Independent letter from Valley Japanese-Americans on June 4, 1942, a day before one of the deportations.

Two came to aid of countrymen

By AUTUMN ALEXANDER
Of the Herald-Republic

Close-knit communities can be especially kind to their members, or especially cruel when race, money or war is involved and the towns of the Yakima Valley were no exception in 1942.

But two townsfolk in Wapato stood up for their Japanese-American neighbors, despite the jingoism reverberating from the Horse Heaven Hills to the Rattlesnake Mountains.

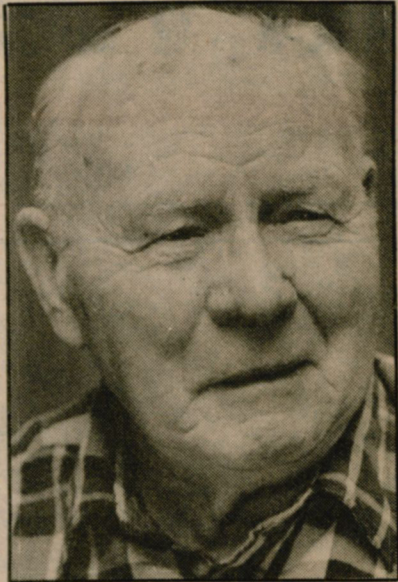
Out of concern for the Japanese-Americans in the Valley and in response to Executive Order 9066, the late Esther Short Boyd, a hardware store owner, and Dan McDonald, a longtime Wapato farmer, volunteered to testify before a special investigatory committee on defense migration in February and March of 1942. The two spoke eloquently.

Boyd and McDonald described the Japanese farmers' skill and flawless civic records. They noted that the Japanese had been in the Valley for more than 25 years and the only reason they weren't citizens was because the law wouldn't allow it.

"Our local Japanese have done everything in their power to cooperate with our government ...," testified Boyd, "but there now develops on the part of some white people

the desire to get rid of these Japanese who have worked diligently, educated their children well and achieved some measure of financial security. The great cry of 'Kick the Japanese out of the Yakima Valley,' is not due to fear of sabotage, it is due to economic reasons."

McDonald, now 91, remembers the picaresque hatreds of many Caucasians toward the Japanese. "They thought they were intruding on them," he says. "Actually they were having trouble competing with them."



DAN McDONALD
... accused of being 'Jap lover'

Both McDonald and Boyd were accused of being "Jap lovers." Some of the townsfolk even boycotted the hardware store. But the small-town sniping and cold shoulders didn't bother McDonald and his wife too much, he says. "I just shook it off. The Japanese were good people, good friends, and they knew how to farm, their children were good students."

McDonald has nothing but respect for his late colleague, Esther Boyd.

"She was brave, she had even more of a chance to be kicked back, but she'd always say 'They've always paid their bills, I can't help but try to help them.'"

McDonald and Boyd even traveled to Spokane to try to extricate some of the Wapato Japanese leaders from behind bars. "They'd

grabbed all those right away," McDonald remembers. But he had no more luck getting them out than his testimony influenced the course of things to come. Evacuation rolled toward their Japanese Valley friends as surely and as ominously as a tank.

As the evacuation days drew nearer, Japanese-Americans McDonald hardly knew knocked at his door seeking a safe place for their possessions. He laughs gently now when he recalls how his yard was full of vehicles, and his attic crammed to the rafters. There weren't many havens.

He and Boyd even helped dismantle the heavy Buddhist altar from Wapato's Buddhist church, storing it in pieces. Today it stands once again in Wapato's Buddhist church as beautiful as it was before the war.

The day the evacuation trains pulled into Wapato, Boyd was down on the platform with her friends, recalls Yoshio Hata, now 72, a prominent Wapato orchardist and civic leader.

"The Army had soldiers walking right toward us but she said, 'No, I'm just going to stand here,'" Hata remembers, noting that the soldiers wound up going around them. "She was really determined. She was real concerned that no other local business people would speak up in our defense."

Even though the Japanese completely disappeared from the Valley in those two spring days, the friendships prevailed. McDonald even traveled to Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming to visit his friends. "It was just bare shacks," McDonald says. "They would've had a hard time escaping."

To this day, the Japanese-Americans who were interned revere McDonald and Boyd.

They were outstanding, "real Christians," says Mas Wada, 73. "They never swerved."

Ono Iseri, now 74, recalls, "We didn't know, we felt 'We can't fight the government.'"

Some of the regulations were almost comical, says 80-year-old Harry Honda now of Spokane, but a Valley native. "It seemed so stupid, we had to get a travel permit to go to Yakima, but the travel permit office was in Yakima. If I wanted to go to Toppenish, I had to go to Yakima."

All this was during wartime when rubber and gas were in short supply.

"But in those days, it's not like now," Honda says. "You got to realize the situation, you did what the Army said."

After two evacuation days — one on May 24 and another on June 5, 1942 — the trains loaded with 1,200 Japanese from Yakima and Wapato were gone. So were the high school graduation plans of the Japanese students, the children's pets and their pals.

As evacuation had drawn closer, "I used to cry every night," says Kondo, "but secretly, I didn't want my parents to know."

The faces pressed against the train windows took it "in stride," says Mas Wada, now 73. "We came from an old traditional culture where we respected elders and authority. We accepted it without an outward voice."

Still, there was the agony of uncertainty and a sense of shame.

"I felt like a guy going off to jail," says Art Kikuchi, now 78. "I thought, 'after I serve my stretch, I wonder if I can come back here? Are they going to send us back to Japan? Always in the back of our minds we felt kind of shamed, like we surely must've done something wrong.'"

The Valley's Japanese families, wearing luggage-tag-like registra-

tion labels pinned to their lapels, milled on the train platform before their departure. The Army was counting noses, weighing baggage — each family was allowed only 100 pounds of possessions. Years later, in 1982 Kondo testified that the soldiers, most of whom were from the eastern and midwestern United States, were dismayed by the job they were being asked to do. And standing on the platform with his new bride Fumi Ono Iseri, 80-year-old Herb Iseri remembers eying their guns and bayonets thinking: "This wasn't America."

Steamy, smelling of manure, surrounded by chained gates, the Portland Livestock Exposition in Portland, Ore., was where the trains disgorged the Valley people. They were joined by approximately 5,000 other Japanese collected along the West Coast. Hastily laid board flooring covered the arena dirt. Each family was assigned an open-top cubicle with 8-foot walls. People walking around the perimeter of the area could look down into the rooms.

"It was quite a shock," said Honda, "especially for a young couple, there was no privacy."

This was the assembly center, a staging area to hold the internees until more isolated, permanent camps were built to hold them. There were shifts for eating, and everyone was required to sit in the same place at each meal at the mess hall. There wasn't enough food. Fumi Iseri, as slender as a blade of grass, lost 12 pounds in a month. They were afraid she had tuberculosis.

But the newlywed glow kept her going even after they were shipped to a desolate internment camp in Heart Mountain, Wyo.

"I was sure that out of this

there was going to be a bright side," she says. "My father was a real strong Christian, and he taught us to look for both sides. But there were people who felt real bad about it."

Some of the Valley families didn't wait to be shipped off to Heart Mountain. By now, the country realized it was hurting for food and for farmers. When the opportunity came to work sugar beets in Eastern Oregon, which was outside of the "military areas," several Valley families volunteered and spent the rest of the war in a farm labor camp working for 45 cents an hour.

"I got tired of looking at the guards," says Mamoru Matsumura, now 80, who left for Malheur County with his wife, Haru. Though they were under armed escort most of the time, he says at least he felt free. "I was just happy to get out."

Tar-paper barracks in the dingy berries, that's how Harry Honda saw Heart Mountain internment camp. Surrounded by guard towers and barbed wire, the one-square-mile patch sans grass, trees or freedom turned into a choking sandbox under the shuffles of 11,000 pairs of feet.

Most of the Valley people who hadn't left the staging center in Portland for either farm labor camps, work or school in the Midwest, went to Heart Mountain. By fall of 1942, money and a confirmed job would merit permission to depart from direct military supervision, but many Valley families tried to stay together. Family traditions were strong and caring for the aging immigrants — the Issei — was a responsibility the American-born Nisei took to heart.

The desolate camp became a rough-hewn city, complete with hospitals, schools for the children, dances, a newspaper and social activities. The green-thumbed farmers of the Valley even made the sandy soil bloom, and the camp became self-sufficient to a certain extent. When they could in 1943, many Nisei even volunteered for military service, leaving their families in the camps.

One of the prevailing arguments for the Japanese internment camps was that these "communes" were for the Japanese-Americans' own good. Supposedly, in seclusion they could be guaranteed safety from violent prejudice, that the guards and fences were there to protect them.

"If that was sincere, then why did they have the guns pointed toward us?" asks Ken Inaba, now 67.

In fact, several of the Wapato families remember the day a man wandered across the camp fence searching for a piece of wood for a bonsai tree he was making. A

guard shot him dead.

But people didn't talk, and they didn't weep, and they didn't agitate, say the former internees. That wasn't their style.

"Shikatagani" — "It can't be helped" — an age-old Japanese adage, prevailed. So, full of uncertainty about the future, they waited — for what they weren't sure.

The nation's 10 internment camps were officially closed Dec. 16, 1944 — after the November elections, but in practice, Heart Mountain didn't really shut down until the fall of 1945.

A rail ticket and \$25 was all the internees were given at the time the gates were opened. After being stripped of their civil rights, most of their possessions and their sense of self-reliance, all that two generations of the Valley's Japanese had to show for themselves was hope, and despite everything, a love of the land "where money grew on trees."

MONDAY: Returning home to the Yakima Valley.

down to the jail, they found Frank Ono and the others had been shipped out the night before to another jail in Missoula, Mont. From there their father was transferred to a number of jails throughout the country, still without any charges or evidence of wrongdoing.

It was a year before the family saw him again when he was shipped to Heart Mountain, Wyo., to join them in an internment camp.

Though there were no intelligence agency reports or other evidence of Japanese-American disloyalty among the 120,000 or so Japanese along the West Coast, no news was taken as bad news. In a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't snare for Japanese immigrants, the absence of trouble was taken as an "ominous sign" of pending security problems by the Military Commander for the Western Command, Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt.

In the ensuing months after the Pearl Harbor attack, DeWitt made more than a 100 military proclamations. The western halves of California, Oregon and Washington became specific areas where Japanese "aliens and non-aliens" were subject to military rules, including curfews, travel restrictions, and forced relocation either inland or to camps.

The Yakima Valley was not among the first military areas designated, but it didn't take long before the border of the exclusion area was moved from the Cascade crest to the Columbia River. In the Yakima Valley, local granges, the local press and others suffering wartime panic and nursing pre-existing anti-Asian feelings looked for reasons to get rid of their Japanese neighbors.

The front page of the March 26, 1942, Wapato Independent quoted a resolution passed by "a group of businessmen and farmers" petitioning DeWitt for "... a complete evacuation of all Japanese, foreign-born as well as those born in the country."

"The vast size and intricacies of our irrigation system make it humanly impossible to properly police and safeguard this huge productive center, and the crying need of the nation for food products makes it absolutely imperative that this danger be eliminated."

They also brought a resolution attacking anyone who opposed the evacuation of the local Japanese.

"By and large, you couldn't find anyone who would say out loud that this was an injustice," says Kara Matsushita Kondo, now in her 70s. "It was a frightening time. You weren't able to trust anyone. People you thought were your friends turned out not to be; others you didn't expect turned out to be."

But there were voices, albeit solitary ones, pointing out that the Japanese were pleasant law-abiding people, model citizens, extremely productive farmers, and their children honor students.

The clamor for evacuation was too loud, however. Encouraged to plant their crops to show loyalty, while at the same time squeezed tighter by dusk-to-dawn curfews, travel restrictions and occasional fire bombings of property, the Japanese farming families knew what was coming as did the other Japanese grocers, hotel managers and business people between Yakima and Toppenish. Approximately 75 farms changed hands at fire-sale prices.

"We just felt hopeless," Fumi