



(Staff photo by Kurt E. Smith)

Harry Uchida, 'Issei' with grandson Chester

Japanese

They survived hard times

By NICK PROVENZA
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(Last in a series)

Many had been farmers in the old country.

Cherishing the prospect of a better life, they packed their bags and came to America.

Some came as laborers to the Yakima Valley.

They, the "Issei" — those born in Japan, but emigrating to America — would own farms of their own one day. They would have children, the Nisei. They would thrive for a time on their farms. They would also face the indignation of a World War II relocation camp. After the war, some would return. Others would scatter for new homes in Ontario, Oregon, or Moses Lake.

The Japanese were once 1,200 strong in the Yakima Valley. They now number between 200 and 300.

They are no longer as united as they once were, when the Japanese Association in Wapato was active in the 1930s.

"I'd say 90 percent of the Japanese in the Valley are farmers," says Mas Seto, a farmer and counselor in the Sunnyside office of the state Employment Security Department.

"But the majority of the young Japanese are gone. A few are coming back," he adds.

Seto's father was a farmer in the Lower Valley near Mabton.

"I remember when I started school down there," he says. "We were looked down upon. It was right after the war

and it was hell for us."

Seto, now 34, was born in the relocation camp in Heart Mountain, Wyo.

That ordeal began on Feb. 19, 1942, during the early days of World War II. Executive Order 9066 had been issued. In May of that year, all persons of Japanese ancestry living in the Yakima and Kittitas valleys were

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ordered out of the area — to be evacuated first to the Portland Livestock Center and later to the middle of nowhere, a relocation camp in Heart Mountain.

By June 7, 1942, all but one or two

Japanese aliens and American-born Japanese Nisei were taken out of the Yakima River Valley. It would be 1946 before the last of them would leave that barbed-wire enclosed camp at Heart Mountain.

Harry Uchida was in that camp.

He is Issei, born in Japan. He, like many other Japanese during the turn of the century, came to America. Uchida came to the Pacific Northwest in 1912.

"There were not many Japanese mechanics here," says Uchida, 89. He lives in a fine brick home on Ashue Road outside Wapato.

"I had a truck and did some hauling. It was 1930s when I did farming," he says, looking out from under an old hat. His words flow out from beneath a large white moustache.

"Yeah, when I came here, I worked like hell. I am 89 and I still work."

Uchida still cuts his own firewood but now he uses a chainsaw. Three of his six children, sons Akira, Mas, and Thomas, have stayed in the Valley and run a successful truck farming business.

"Yeah my dad was a mechanic before the war," says Akira Uchida, who at 52 is the second oldest of the Uchida children. "He farmed on the side, some 40 acres. But we started seriously farming in 1955."

The Japanese in America have lived under the mantle of the hardworking, quiet, good-guy-to-hire stereotype.

Some Japanese-Americans in the (Please turn to Japanese, Page 10)

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Yakima Valley say the stereotype is at least partially true.

"To me," says Akira Uchida, peering through his thick-lensed eyeglasses, "it don't bother me one bit."

Kara Kondo, whose pharmacist husband is one of a handful of Asian-American professionals in the Valley, said there may be some explanation for the stereotype.

"I think it's a condition of minorities," she said. "You don't complain much. You try to be invisible. You try to stay out of trouble. Don't draw attention to yourself. And that may be because if you were in the spotlight, it was usually a negative one, something bad happened."

"Things have been good and bad for the Japanese here."

As one Asian-American writer put it, many older Japanese-Americans put life in America into three eras, before the war, camp, and after camp.

Long before World War II, the first Japanese came to the Yakima Valley. That first couple may have been a Mr. and Mrs. Oka, who settled on a farm in the Selah area in 1892.

By 1915, there were some 500 Japanese in the Yakima Valley, mostly farmers.

Like the Filipinos, the Japanese felt the pressures of the state's Anti-Alien laws of 1921 and 1923. The laws barred them from owning or directly leasing the Yakima Indian Reservation land where many of them farmed. The Immigration Act of 1924 virtually ended the migration of Japanese to this country. The Anti-Alien laws forced many of them to leave the area in search of other jobs.

With the 1930s came the depression and like other American residents, the Japanese felt the problems of that decade.

Because many Filipinos were entering the country and the Yakima Valley at that time, a new wave of anti-Oriental feelings swept the local area. The struggle for jobs brought riots against the Filipinos. The Japanese-Americans, who hired a lot of the Filipinos as farm laborers, dodged bombs and watched their homes burn.

Then Pearl Harbor was bombed. Local Japanese were forced to leave their land and homes and were sent to the relocation camp at Heart Mountain. Many stayed there for four years.

"They (the Issei) didn't like it but they took it," says Akira Uchida.

"They took it because they couldn't do anything about it."

Those who failed to report for camp were subject to jail sentences.

"Most Issei's will abide by the law under any circumstances," said Uchida.

His younger brother, Tom, agrees.

"If the government told you you had to sell or give away all your belongings, you sold it and took what you could. There was nothing you could do about it. For a lot of the Japanese, the FBI came to your door and just said come on. Many had no time to take anything."

Only a few hundred returned to the Yakima Valley after camp.

Those who returned took up farming again, but suffered from the widespread anti-Japanese prejudices following the war.

"Right after the war, we did have to deal with some of that," says Akira Uchida, who graduated from high school at Heart Mountain. "But we overcame it."

Kara Kondo spent six months at Heart Mountain before she was allowed to go east and marry.

"It's mind boggling that the whole thing ever happened," said Mrs. Kondo, now who lives in Terrace Heights. "Some parents didn't even tell their children they were interned at a relocation camp. There is a shame connected with being imprisoned even if it was for doing nothing at all."

"When you talk about the camps, it sounds miserable and to some extent it was. But we are a resilient people aren't we?"

Most of the Japanese who returned to the Yakima Valley after World War II purchased farms in the Wapato and Toppenish area, where they still live today.

Only a few Issei are living today and most are in their 80s and 90s. The Nisei, the first American-born Japanese, are now the figureheads of the families.

Their children, the Sansei, are like other Asian-American children in the Valley. They are getting educated, discovering job opportunities are not in the Yakima Valley, and leaving for the coast.

"The Japanese are very great about pushing for an education," says Mrs. Kondo. "Many of the young have by and large moved away. A few are remaining, but a greater percentage are moving out."

"Yes most of them are gone," says Akira Uchida. "But some may come back to farm. My boy says he wants to go to college to learn agriculture. But then he might not be a farmer. He might go to work for a cannery or in agri-business or something like that."

Since they have generally lived a rural life in the Valley, the farms have kept the Japanese-Americans here from participating in many civic or community functions. They have, however, been active in the American Legion. They also hold a few Japanese-American banquets during the year.

"But It's getting so many of the younger kids are leaving and only the old people are left. So we don't do many things together like we used to," says Akira Uchida.

In 1973, a reunion of Japanese-Americans from the Yakima Valley, for those here and those who had left, was held here and hundreds of them attended.

The Japanese-American community in the Valley has flourished in the farming trade. Some, like the Hata family, own orchards. There also are truck farmers like Mas Jio and the Uchidas.

The community has seen the green wealth of the Valley and the barren, coldness of the Heart Mountain camp. And they have seen prejudice and brotherhood.

Many of their parents came to America with nothing but the want of a decent living.

"Yes it's been really better in America, thank you," says 89-year-old Harry Uchida as he sits near his handmade Japanese garden, complete with a flowing pond and golden fish.

Ingrained in the life of the Valley, Harry Uchida points to his creation and says with pride and a smile, "That is my little Yakima River."

JAPANESE-AMERICANS