

# Japanese American Wartime Incarceration in Oregon

By Craig Collisson

Masuo Yasui, together with many members of Hood River's Japanese community, spent the evening of December 6, 1941, rehearsing the annual Christmas show at a local community center. Yasui, an Issei (first-generation immigrant from Japan), had traveled to America in 1903 at the age of sixteen. He eventually settled in Oregon, where he became a successful businessman, farmer, and community leader. When he learned about Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, he raced to the Japanese community hall and warned those attending church there to "remain calm" and "return to your homes." That night, rumors flew through Hood River that local Japanese had known about the attacks, that they had been at the community center planning a victory celebration, and that they were planning to blow up Bonneville Dam.

Hysterical headlines about the role the Japanese population had played in the attack appeared in newspapers in Oregon and up and down the West Coast. One newspaper reported that the bodies of Japanese navy men had been found near Cannon Beach. A headline in the *Hillsboro Argus* warned that "Officials Feel Japanese May Try Anything." American Legion chapters in Oregon spread the story that hidden supplies of arms and ammunition had been found in Japanese homes.

Federal restrictions on Issei quickly followed. The federal government froze Japanese bank assets and imposed travel restrictions and a curfew. Issei, now considered "enemy aliens," were prohibited from owning firearms, explosives, shortwave radios, and cameras. The week after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI searched Issei homes and arrested two thousand Issei men living on the West Coast, detaining one man in Hood River when they found a single bullet in his woodshed. They detained Masuo Yasui after searching his house, where they confiscated maps and his children's drawings. The FBI would later use those maps to accuse him of planning to blow up the Panama Canal. They detained Masuo Yasui because he was "a wealthy...merchant and farmer" who was "strongly Japanese and wants to do something for that government."

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the secretary of war to "prescribe military areas...from which any or all persons may be excluded." The order was predicated on the idea that, as an alien people unable to assimilate, the Japanese remained loyal to Japan. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt recommended that all people of Japanese ancestry be removed from the West Coast. He argued that "the Japanese race is an enemy race. The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken." DeWitt's fears proved unfounded; no person of Japanese ancestry living in the United States was ever charged with an act of sabotage.

Ten days after President Roosevelt signed the order, DeWitt issued Public Proclamation No. 1, which created Military Areas 1 and 2. Japanese living in those zones, the eastern edge of which roughly followed Highway 97 in Oregon, were to be forcibly removed to incarceration camps farther inland. The few Nikkei (persons of Japanese ancestry who are not citizens of Japan) living east of the exclusion area were not affected.

/media-collections/166/

Masuo Yasui's son, Minoru, a practicing attorney, believed that 9066 was unconstitutional and unenforceable. On March 28, 1942, he deliberately broke the federally imposed 8:00 pm to 6:00 am curfew that applied to all Nikkei in Military Areas 1 and 2 by walking around downtown Portland. He then turned himself in to the police. In his initial trial, Judge James Fee ruled that the United States, in the absence of martial law, had no right to impose a curfew on its citizens.

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, without ruling or review, sent the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, where *Yasui v. United States* was heard as a companion case to *Hirabayashi v. United States*. Gordon Hirabayashi, a student at the University of Washington, had reported to the Seattle FBI office that he had violated the curfew order in that city and intended to violate the

exclusion order. He was sentenced to ninety days of hard labor. The Supreme Court heard both cases in May 1943 and unanimously ruled that the United States could impose such a curfew out of military necessity.

In April 1942, officials posted Civil Exclusion Orders No. 25 and No. 26 on telephone poles and store windows throughout Multnomah County. A few weeks later, Civilian Exclusion Order No. 49 was posted in Hood River. The orders gave all Nikkei only a few days to put their affairs in order before they had to report for evacuation. Many quickly sold their businesses, homes, and property at whatever price they could. Mrs. Itsu Akiyama, who lived in Hood River, later remembered: "Caucasians came to buy our cow and calf. They told me, 'This is forty dollars. This is fifty dollars.' I would just reply, 'All right.'"

On May 5, 1942, Nikkei in Military Area No. 1 reported to the Portland Assembly Center, leaving their pets, possessions, and lives behind. The center—a hastily constructed camp on the site of the Pacific International Livestock Exposition—was surrounded by barbed wire, watchtowers, and military guards armed with machine guns. The center had a peak population of 3,676. Those living in Military Area No 2, including the Japanese Americans in Hood River, were sent by train to the Pinedale Assembly Center in California's San Joaquin Valley.

The government-named assembly centers served as temporary detention camps while ten permanent camps were being built. Overall, there were sixteen such camps, the majority of which were built on racetracks or fairgrounds and located relatively close to Japanese populations. The detention camps lacked privacy and basic sanitation. At the Portland camp, thin sheets of plywood were used to create housing units that were each lighted with a single, bare bulb. Because the living areas had no ceilings, families could hear everything their neighbors were doing. The smell of manure was often overwhelming.

[/media-collections/68/](#)

By the summer of 1942, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) began to transfer the Japanese to permanent "relocation centers." Those living in Hood River and southwest Oregon were moved to Tule Lake, just south of Klamath Falls in northern California. Most of the people at the Portland Assembly Center were sent to Minidoka, Idaho, one of ten camps located in remote areas of the West. Ironically, by the time the camps were constructed, the United States had turned the tide of the war in the Pacific at the battle of Midway, eliminating the threat of a Japanese invasion of the West Coast.

The camps were prisons with deplorable living conditions. Surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, the installations were tightly managed by the WRA. Both Tule Lake and Minidoka were located in desert plains, and the rapidly constructed barracks meant that those held there faced blistering heat and blowing dust in summer and bone-chilling cold in winter. Latrines were open-pit toilets built back-to-back in rows of six. Women would often use cardboard to screen themselves or use latrines late at night when they could find some privacy. Food poisoning and illness were rampant. The WRA assigned living quarters based on immediate family but with no regard for extended family. Many Issei mourned the erosion of traditional family life, as children ate with their friends, not their family.

Nikkei did their best to create a community and make the camps livable. They set up fire and police departments, published newspapers, held dances, and formed baseball teams. They planted "victory gardens" that augmented the food produced by the large-scale agricultural enterprises overseen by the WRA. Men used scrap lumber to make furniture, including desks, tables, and chairs; and at Topaz, in Utah, women dug shells from a ditch inside the camp that they made into jewelry. Men and women offered classes in many subjects, including flower arranging, sewing, and English.

Most of the adults held jobs in food production, construction, maintenance, meal preparation, and security. They received a small wage, initially ranging from eight to sixteen dollars a month. Children attended school, although there were no books or desks. Students sat on the floor while teachers held a small blackboard. Eventually, some books and desks were provided, but

classrooms remained overcrowded and had insufficient supplies.

Even before the Japanese were moved from the detention camps the government wavered on its decision to permanently incarcerate all Nikkei. College-age Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans) were allowed to attend college if they left the West Coast military zone. Exceptions were also made for agricultural laborers and armed services volunteers.

In 1942, labor shortages led to the WRA's formation of an agricultural leave program. In Malheur County, for example, the Amalgamated Sugar Company had persuaded local farmers to increase their production of sugar to meet increased war demands, and they petitioned the government for Japanese labor to thin and harvest sugar beets. In response to the need for agricultural labor, Oregon Governor Charles Sprague and his executive secretary, George Aiken, developed what became known as the Oregon Plan. At an April 1942 WRA conference, Aiken outlined his plan to relocate Oregon's Japanese residents to abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Malheur, Harney, and Crook Counties.

While the plan was rejected, the WRA consented to a more modest program that allowed for as many as four hundred Japanese to provide labor in Malheur County. The program had strict regulations designed to prevent the exploitation of workers and also to eliminate conflict with anti-Japanese locals. Forty-three people volunteered. The first laborers persuaded others to join them, and by summer four hundred Japanese were tending potatoes, onions, and celery as well as threshing grain and maintaining irrigation canals. While some locals complained that the workers were taking over the county, there was only one documented incident of violence.

Another route out of the camp was enlistment in the armed services. In 1943, the U.S. government announced the formation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up of twelve hundred Nisei volunteers from the camps and 3,000 Nisei men from Hawaii. The 442nd became one of the most highly decorated units in American history. In World War II, eight thousand Nisei served in the armed forces.

/media-collections/69/

In December 1944, when it was clear that the Japanese military no longer posed any threat to the West Coast and the Supreme Court was about to hand down its decision in *Ex Parte Endo*, a case that questioned whether incarceration could any longer be justified, the military ended its policy of exclusion. Although the War Department declared that the Japanese were free to leave camps as of January 2, 1945, by March only a hundred had returned to Oregon. Understanding that racism coupled with fears of economic competition meant that many communities strongly opposed the Nikkei's return, the WRA urged those still in the camps to head east.

Many Oregonians actively campaigned against the return of Japanese Americans to their communities. In February, the Oregon House passed Joint Memorial No. 9, urging President Roosevelt to "prevent the return of said Japanese aliens and said citizens of Japanese extraction to the west coast states for the duration of the present war with Japan." In Hood River, almost every store displayed a "No Japs Allowed" placard in its windows. Former Oregon governor Walter Pierce spoke for many when he said: "We should never be satisfied until every last Jap has been run out of [the] United States and our Constitution changed so they can never get back." A few individuals and groups welcomed the returning Nikkei. In Hood River, a group of citizens formed the League for Liberty and Justice, which sought to assist Nikkei by meeting them at trains, buying them goods, and delivering their produce to market.

Nikkei rightfully feared violence if they returned. Vigilantes vandalized their farm equipment, broke their windows, and harassed and intimidated them. In November 1944, American Legion Post No. 22 in Hood River voted to remove the names of sixteen Nisei from a plaque honoring those who had served in World War II. The action received extensive local and nationwide criticism, and the *Hood River News* received dozens of letters to the editor demanding that the names be restored. In April 1945, under pressure from the American Legion national headquarters, the names were once again added to the plaque.

Eventually, 70 percent of the four thousand incarcerated Nikkei from Oregon returned to the state. Incarceration had damaged the Japanese Americans psychologically, socially, and economically. By the time the war ended, they held title to only 25 percent of the land they held prior to incarceration. Many lost faith in the United States and its institutions and expressed shame and humiliation. At the same time, however, the camps brought the Japanese American community closer together. For many, incarceration in the camps became a defining experience.

The civil rights and ethnic power movements began to change how many Americans viewed the camps. Prodded by activists Raymond Okamura and Edison Uno, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) supported a resolution in 1970 demanding that the government compensate Nikkei incarcerated during World War II. In 1980, Congress created the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. After holding hearings and doing extensive archival research, the commission's 1983 report acknowledged that "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership," not military necessity, had led to Japanese incarceration. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation that provided \$20,000 for each person incarcerated. Two years later, the first nine Nikkei received their checks along with an official apology from President George H. W. Bush.

In Oregon, activists held commemorations that publicized the injustice of incarceration. Modeled on an event held in Washington State a few months earlier, Portland's JACL held its first Day of Remembrance on February 17, 1979, at the site of the Pacific International Livestock Exposition. The Day of Remembrance is celebrated annually in Portland on February 19, the anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066; other Days of Remembrance have been held in Hood River and Eugene. The Japanese American Historical Plaza at Waterfront Park is another way Oregon has memorialized the hardships suffered by Nikkei during World War II. Dedicated in 1990, landscape architect Robert Murase used thirteen engraved stones of basalt and granite to tell the story of Japanese incarceration and to reiterate the importance of the Bill of Rights.

## Sources

Tamura, Linda. *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Kessler, Lauren. *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2005.

Azuma, Eiichiro. "A History of Oregon's Issei, 1880-1952." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 94 (1993): 315-67.

Robbins, William. "Monroe Sweetland and Japanese Americans." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 113, (2012): 198-229.

Olmstead, Timothy. "Nikkei Internment: The Perspective of Two Oregon Weekly Newspapers." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 85 (1984): 5-32.

Kodachi, Zuigaku, with Jan Keikkala, trans., and Janet Cormack, ed. "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 81 (1980): 149-172.

"Life on the Home Front: Oregon Responds to World War II. *Oregon State Archives*.

Densho, The Japanese American Legacy Project. <http://densho.org/>

---

The Oregon Encyclopedia

[https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/japanese\\_internment/](https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/japanese_internment/)