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## **5,434 Japanese Americans, nationals found a temporary home behind barbed wire at Pomona fairgrounds**

*By Joe Blackstock, Staff Writer*

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POMONA - Out in the west parking lot of Fairplex, where dragsters race and fair-goers park their SUVs, there's no trace of a once-bustling city of wood and tar paper, and tears.

No monument marks the spot in Pomona - fittingly enough because it was a place best forgotten by those who lived there.

At this site 70 years ago this week, Japanese-Americans and Japanese nationals were interned, or imprisoned, or evacuated - the appropriate verb will always be a matter of debate.

Just five months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Pomona Assembly Center was opened on May 8, 1942, to house 5,434 Japanese while permanent camps for their internment were being built.

All Southern California residents of Japanese descent, including American citizens, were ordered in March and April 1942 to dispose of homes, businesses, and most of their possessions and move to camps at the Pomona fairgrounds or at Santa Anita Race Track in Arcadia.

Then, barely four months later, the Pomona center abruptly became a ghost town when its residents were loaded onto trains bound for remote places with names like Heart Mountain, Tule Lake and Manzanar.

The ramshackle housing at Pomona was later used for U.S. troops and still later by Italian and German prisoners of war.

Shortly after the war's end, it was all torn down. Only a few photographs and some faded memories are left to validate the short existence of the camp at Pomona.

"You know, at the time, I was 18 and really had no problem with what the government was doing to us," explained Paul Tsuneishi of Sunland in an interview 10 years ago. He came to Pomona with his family from their home in Monrovia.

"I really didn't realize that as an American my civil rights were being violated until the 1950s and 1960s, when the civil rights movement began. It was only then as an older person that I finally understood what happened to us."

The fear of a Japanese military invasion of the West Coast and rumors of collaboration, not to mention anti-Asian laws already in place before the war, made the internment order necessary and justified in the eyes of military and civilian authorities.

By the time the internment camps were opened, the threat of invasion had been greatly eased due to

Japanese losses in the naval battles of Midway and the Coral Sea, but internment continued throughout the war.

Harry Murakami of Gardena was a 21-year-old student at Biola College living in Monrovia when his family of strawberry farmers was ordered to report to a church in El Monte to be bused to the fairgrounds.

"Even though it was a warm time of year I wore a long coat with lots of pockets when we reported to El Monte," he recalled in 2002. "They told us we could only bring with us what we could carry. I filled the pockets with everything I needed that I couldn't get in my suitcases, which were full of books."

### **Not quite a prison, but close**

What they found at the fairgrounds were monotonous rows of wooden buildings, surrounded by a high fence and guard towers. It wasn't a prison in the pure sense, but it was close.

Here are two contrasting versions of the arrival at the fairgrounds:

"Dressed in tailored slacks, spring frocks, tweed coats and cuffless gabardine suits, 72 Japanese acting as American as an Iowa picnic party arrived late Friday at the Los Angeles County fairground assembly center to turn in a way of life for the rest of the war," wrote the Pomona Progress-Bulletin on May 9.

But a woman arriving at the camp recalled it differently.

"The first sight of the barbed wire enclosure with armed soldiers standing guard as our bus slowly turned in through the gate stunned us," recalled Estelle Ishigo, an Anglo woman married to a Japanese-American. "Here was a camp of sheds, enclosed with a high barbed wire fence, with guard towers and soldiers with machine guns."

Clarence H. Uno of El Monte was probably the only active member of the American Legion interned at Pomona.

At a time when Japanese nationals were barred from citizenship, Uno had become a citizen in 1936 as a result of an act of Congress after 10 months service with the Army in France during World War I.

"We wouldn't be safe if left alone, and those of us ready to help America would be suspected of sabotage done by the few who are disloyal," Uno told the Pomona newspaper. "There is, of course, some grumbling among the evacuees, but most of us know we can best serve the country by cooperating in the program."

Uno would die later that year at the Heart Mountain, Wyo., internment camp, his coffin draped with an American flag to honor his military service.

At Pomona, it took only a week or two for the small impromptu town to swell to capacity with the arrivals. Each house had an address, meals were served in eight mess halls, and there were hospitals and libraries. Also there were Protestant, Catholic and Buddhist churches.

The buildings has been hastily assembled by civilian crews in the month before the camp opened. Often the drafty houses would serve two families, separated by little more than a thin wood wall, affording very little privacy.

"I remember that you would be able to hear the conversations of the family next to you," said Murakami, who would later become a Methodist minister.

"The floor boards also didn't fit together very well so when you were sweeping the floor, all the dirt would fall through the cracks before you could ever get it to the door."

## **Keeping occupied**

So how do you occupy yourself when brought into a confined place, with no work to do, and nothing but time on your hands?

Murakami said volunteers were sought to teach school for young people so he did that during his time in Pomona, as well as holding Bible classes. Tsuneishi occupied himself working in the mess hall.

Classes from flower arranging to wood carving were offered at the camp, anything to keep the internees busy. There were softball leagues, table tennis contests, a boxing tournament and a bridge competition. Just before the camp closed, 240-pound Iruharu Shimatsu won the sumo wrestling tournament.

And even with guard towers, the life at the camp went on ...

There was a barber shop as well as a beauty salon -- "Patrons must bring their own pins and curlers," advised the camp's newspaper, the Pomona Center News.

On May 22, the first "new" resident arrived. Four-pound, 11-ounce Yukio Arthur Kishiyama was born to Kay and Tsuyuko Kishiyama in the camp hospital.

Love bloomed as well. Jack Nishimoto was married to Lillian Matsumoto on Aug. 3 in a ceremony performed by Pomona Judge Will G. Fields.

But law and order didn't always prevail.

The same Judge Fields on July 10 sentenced Shigeo Miyazuki to 90 days in county jail for disturbing the peace. Miyazuki had apparently been spurned by a girl friend in the camp and caused a ruckus when she took up with someone else.

About 185 high school and junior college students who had been pulled out of classes by the relocation received diplomas in a ceremony June 29. Among those were Kazuo Sei and Kiroshi Kuwata, both graduates of Pomona Junior College, the predecessor of Mt. San Antonio College.

There was a fenced-off area of the camp where "our Caucasian friends" could visit, recalled resident Mike Hatchimonji. "To their credit and our gratitude they came despite gas rationing," he said.

## **4th of July celebrated**

In a harsh irony, the camp celebrated Independence Day. Softball games and running races were held on July 4 as well as an evening-long schedule of events.

The program included dances and music ranging from traditional Japanese music to more American tunes, such as "I'm a Old Cow Hand," sung by Isamu Zaiman, and a "Boogie Woogie" piano duet by Nobuko Suto and Niko Watanabe.

As the weeks passed, there was growing curiosity and concern about where the camp residents would be permanently housed.

The Pomona Center News, on Aug. 1, ran a bold headline that said,

"Rumors Say We're Going to WYOMING." And the rumors were right.

A few days later came official word that most of the residents would be heading for a place called Heart Mountain, north of Cody and just a few miles east of Yellowstone National Park.

Tsuneishi was with the first group that left in early August on a Southern Pacific train to get the facility up and running for the remainder of the camp's residents, who would ultimately number more than 10,000.

Pomona camp residents began leaving by train on Aug. 15, and by month's end the once-bustling streets of the center were empty.

Kei Hori, editor of the Pomona Center News, offered rather light-hearted tips for those about to take their first train ride.

"May we suggest you take along some sort of amusements to while away the time," wrote Hori, "like a girl friend."

But given the unknown, it probably wasn't a very amusing trip.

"I remember it was one very long and boring train ride," said Murakami. When the train would pass through a city, they were required to draw shades over the windows.

As it turned out, neither Murakami nor Tsuneishi would spend that much time at Heart Mountain.

Murakami actually left the camp after 2 1/2 months after receiving permission to attend classes in Illinois at Wheaton College. After the war, he ministered at churches from West Los Angeles to the Central Valley to Seattle.

Tsuneishi also got out of Heart Mountain after a while, volunteering to be an agricultural worker. The war had drawn away field laborers from the West so he received \$30 a month working in potato, hay and sugar beet fields from California to Montana.

### **Drafted from the camp**

Residents of the camp were not immune from the draft. Tsuneishi later went into the Army and was set to join the highly decorated, all-Japanese-American 442nd Infantry Regimental Combat Team when the war in Europe ended.

He was later given language training and spent the rest of his military career with occupation troops in Japan.

Tsuneishi says that for years afterward he had great difficulty discussing his incarceration at Pomona and Heart Mountain.

"It was such a traumatic event, especially after I got older and really realized what has happened. I had difficulty talking about it for a while even with my wife," he explained.

He said most of the Japanese who went to the camp did so willingly, mostly because of the desire to fit in, to be accepted in American society. He had seen racism firsthand in Monrovia as a youth, but there it had been more directed toward black residents of that community.

"In this desire to be accepted and to fit in, we didn't realize that something was being lost, that your

values were being changed as well," he said. "Most Americans just don't understand the racism of those times, and that it wasn't just in the South. It was here, too."

For Murakami, the time spent at the two camps in some ways became a personal growing period. He was able to spend time with his Bible studies, practicing what he would do during his post-war life at the pulpit.

"I really don't think everyone was very politically aware at that time; I know I didn't realize my political rights were being violated," he said. "Some accepted what went on and others were really angry.

"I took the attitude that I would go wherever the Lord led me."

Pomona Center News editor Hori wrote a regular column with the appropriate title, "Crying Out Loud," in which he took some subtle liberties. Here's his rather insightful view of the situation:

"My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for good is always right. We would like to pass the above to you. It is one of our favorite lines by the great President Abraham Lincoln.

"If he did bear the tragedy of the civil war for his country, then the civil war in my heart can also be endured."

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