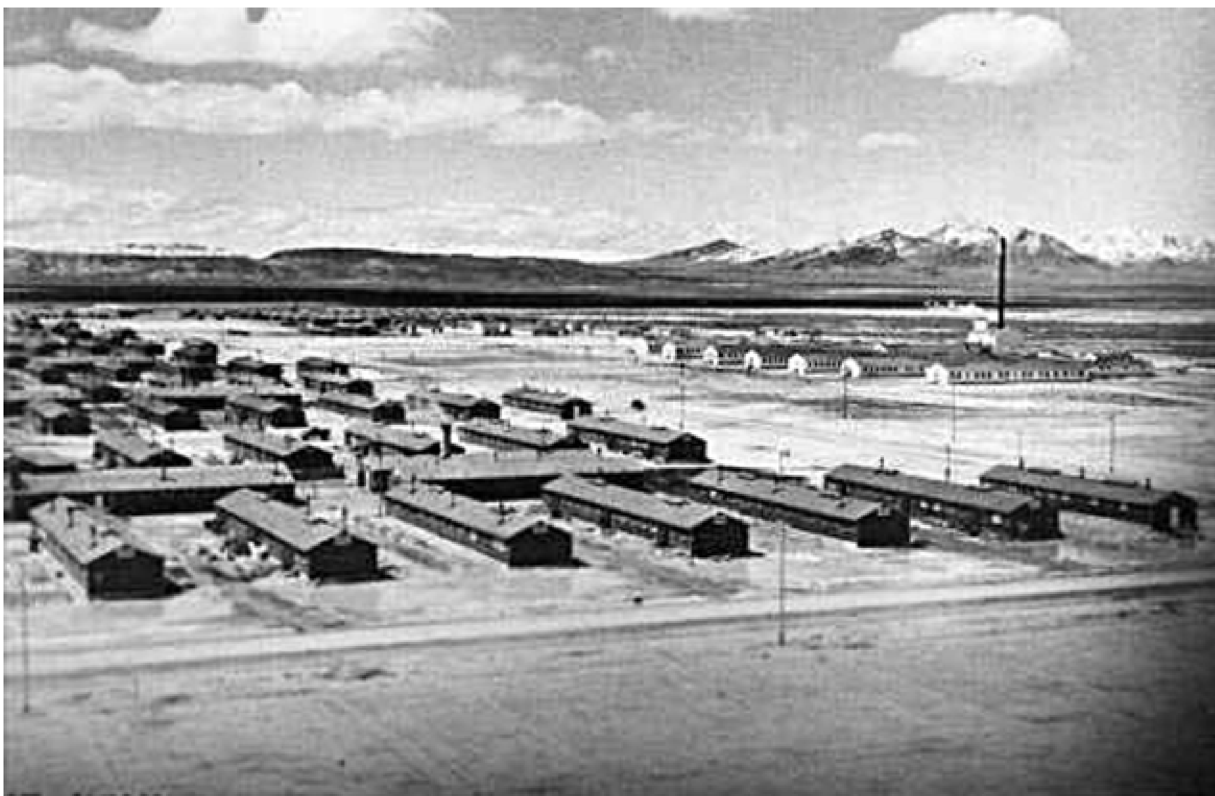
'C A M P'

Memories of the Japanese Internment 1942-1945

By Alan Mikuni

Introduction

On September 4, 2012, I submitted a comment to the Zephyr on Lloyd Pierson's article on "Moab's Concentration Camp,"published in the June/July 2012 issue of The Canyon Country Zephyr. In his article, Pierson discussed a facility at a former Civilian Conservations Corps camp near Dalton Wells, Utah, managed by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) during World War II. I mentioned that my father was imprisoned at another WRA facility located at nearby Topaz, one of ten larger camps hastily constructed to imprison Americans of Japanese ancestry following the commencement of hostilities between the United States and the Empire of Japan after its attack on Pearl Harbor. Recently, Tonya Stiles asked me to write a follow-up article, chronicling the lives of my parents and how camps like the ones located in Moab and Topaz, impacted their lives.



My recollection is similar to hundreds of other articles, essays, and remembrances written and published by families of formerly imprisoned Japanese-American men and women, now in their eighties, nineties, older, or deceased.

The hope is to record individual oral histories about their World War II experiences before..., well, before it becomes too late. Both my parents, John and Amy Mikuni, have passed away, Dad in 2003 and Mom in 2013, but fortunately, we did have a little time to discuss "camp". I am discovering that I have more questions to ask Mom and Dad, and, now, it IS too late. The World War II concentration camp experience was painful for the Japanese-Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and unlawfully incarcerated for nearly four years, and many remained silent about their experiences for the rest of their lives.

I recall as a pre-teen attending family gatherings after "the War" and hearing Mom, Dad, my "Ba-chan" (grandmother), my "Ji-chan" (grandfather), and my uncles and aunts refer to someone they knew from "camp." I presumed everyone was talking about Boy Scout or Girl Scout camp...

Families were forced to leave their homes, their possessions, and their traditional family lives and shipped to remote places for unknown reasons. To these Japanese-Americans, Japan was an enemy, much like Germany and Italy, the other members of The Axis with whom the United States was at war. To be associated in any way with this enemy of my country was shocking, unbelievable, and hurtful.

This was particularly true of my parents. I recall as a pre-teen attending family gatherings after "the War" and hearing Mom, Dad, my "Ba-chan" (grandmother), my "Ji-chan" (grandfather), and my uncles and aunts refer to someone they knew from "camp." I presumed everyone was talking about Boy Scout or Girl Scout camp, because I only knew about those types of camps from my school classmates. When I asked my parents about "camp", there was silence or a "never mind," so I concluded I was correct.

Specific words or phrases in the Japanese language describe how Japanese people deal with situations like they endured in World War II. The Japanese term, "shikataganai", when translated means "it cannot be helped." Another term, "gaman" is loosely translated as "enduring the unbearable with dignity and silence."

I understand the dangers of broad, sweeping generalizations about any group of people, but these terms characterize very well the demeanor of many Japanese-Americans, especially my parents, and how they felt about and dealt with the events surrounding their incarceration. Then, they found themselves having to move on with their lives in the aftermath. After the war, at mealtimes and during other Mikuni family times with my brothers, the subject was simply not discussed. It wasn't until I took an Asian studies course during my time at Fresno State (I was 22 at the time), did I really learn about "the Camps," although in an academic environment.

At first, I was, interestingly, angry at my parents for withholding their personal stories about the camps. I came to understand that it was simply too painful for them to discuss. My Asian studies instructor and my classmates expected me, since I was a "Sansei" (third-generation Japanese-American), to provide personal insights, observations, and other contributions to the class discussion. I had none to offer because I was totally clueless about the topic. I did not personally experience the camps, since I was not born until after World War II ended and the camps had been closed. Thus began the long-delayed dialogue with my parents about their lives in "camp". Incidentally, "shikataganai" and "gaman" were sprinkled throughout our conversations, and I even learned a little about the Japanese language. My parents chose not to teach my brothers and me the Japanese language out of a concern that being fluent in the language would subject Ron, Dennis, and me to a repeat of what happened in 1942. Being bilingual in what should have been my natural 2nd language would have been advantageous in today's global economy, but, shikataganai.

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The United States Government, both during and following World War II, used terminology as a means to moderate the public perception of the severity and extremes of its actions, now recognized as illegal. For instance, in many public official documents of the time, the term "non-aliens" is used to denote American CITIZENS of Japanese ancestry. This euphemistic tactic was intended to prevent the formulation of the logical question from the public, "why are American citizens being rounded-up and imprisoned"?

Even the Japanese-American community had for many years mistakenly and incorrectly continued to use the euphemistic wartime terms, perhaps as a means to minimize their own pain and embarrassment. As William Safire, noted author, stated: "To some degree, euphemism is a strategic misrepresentation." In this article, I use the currently accepted terminology for the wartime situation with a reference to the euphemistic term, e.g., "citizen (PKA (Previously Known As) non-alien)". It is interesting to note here that even the name of the Federal agency responsible for the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese-Americans, the War Relocation Authority, was a euphemism. Its proper name should have been "War Forced-Removal-and-Incarceration Authority," but for the purpose of this article, I will use the official historic nomenclature, War Relocation Authority or WRA.

This article is my first formal effort to document my parents' journeys leading to, their time during, and following, their World War II experience. My informal research began with those chats with Mom and Dad in 1969, and continuing as my brothers and I prepared for Mom and Dad's 50th wedding anniversary in 1996. Thanks to Tonya's request, I am now able to complete the work, and to share it with the Zephyr.

Mom - Amy Yemiko (Takeuchi) Mikuni

My mother, Amy, was a "Nisei", or second-generation Japanese-American. She was born in 1922 in Del Rey, California, about 15 miles southeast of Fresno, in the Central Valley of California. Her father, Waichi Takeuchi, was born in Japan and immigrated to the United States in 1901. Her mother, Ayano Tomosuye, was born on the Big Island of Hawai'I, in what was then, Territory of Hawai'i. She left Hawai'I to travel to Japan for her schooling, and arrived in California in 1920. I am presuming that my grandmother was a "picture bride", since her wedding year and her arrival year were both 1920. My grand-parents were considered "Issei", or first-generation Japanese Americans, who, because of alien exclusion laws in place at the time, were prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens. "Issei" is generally accepted as the term for the first generation of immigrants from Japan, but my grandmother was actually, technically, born on American soil, and became naturalized. Mom and her family (Waichi and Ayano, sisters Mats and Erma, and brothers Harry, Ken, Dan, Floyd, Leo, and Victor), operated a farm west of Fresno. Due to the California Alien Land Laws in existence at the time, my grandparents were prohibited from owning property. However, the land upon which the Takeuchi family lived and raised strawberries, grapes, and peaches, was purchased in the name of my Uncle Harry, the eldest of the Takeuchi sons. Mom helped with caring for her younger sister and brothers, worked on the family farm, and continued her schooling in local schools until her 1939 graduation from Central High School in Fresno.

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Dad- John Shigeo Mikuni

My father, John, was born in 1920 in Walnut Grove, California, about 30 miles south of Sacramento. My father's parents, Daikichi and Matsu Mikuni, immigrated to the United States in 1916, and settled in the Sacramento Valley in California to work in agriculture. Although technically a "Nisei" because he was born in the United States to "Issei" parents, Dad was considered a "Kibei"(like Harry Ueno in Lloyd Pierson's Zephyr article). Dad traveled to Japan with his parents as an infant, and attended elementary school and high school in the city of Iwakuni . He then returned to the US and California in 1937 to join his older sister in Oakland. His other older sister arrived from Japan in San Francisco about 2 months later. Dad's parents, Daikichi and Matsu, remained in Japan. Dad lived with his sister Yuriko, her husband, and 2 nephews and niece in Oakland where he helped with the family gardening business. His other sister, Fumiko, later moved to Los Angeles.

December 1941 to May 1942

After the United States declared war on the Empire of Japan after its December 7, 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, American citizens and legal residents of Japanese ancestry immediately came under intense scrutiny and suspicion. ALL Japanese, regardless of citizenship or resident status, were immediately assigned blame for, or associated with, the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, and the scope of the suspicion soon expanded to potential espionage, sabotage, and subversion. Thus, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which provided for the protection of national security assets in military zones, such as the Pacific Coast. Citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry residing in these designated military zones were considered threats to the national security, and were directed to be forcibly removed (PKA evacuated) from those military zones. Beginning in May of 1942, notifications, such as the one posted in the Los Angeles area [pictured], appeared in major population centers on the Pacific Coast, such as Oakland and Fresno in California.

WESTERN DEFENSE COMMAND AND FOURTH ARMY
WARTIME CIVIL CONTROL ADMINISTRATION
Presidio of San Francisco, California
May 3, 1942

INSTRUCTIONS
TO ALL PERSONS OF
JAPANESE
ANCESTRY

Living in the Following Area:

[illegible]

The Following Instructions Must Be Observed:

[illegible]

Go to the Civil Control Station between the hours of 8:00 A. M. and 5:00 P. M., Monday, May 4, 1942, or between the hours of 8:00 A. M. and 5:00 P. M., Tuesday, May 5, 1942, to receive further instructions.

J. L. DeWITT
Lieutenant General, U. S. Army
Commanding

Japanese-Americans and resident-aliens throughout the military security zones were directed to report to Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA) temporary detention centers (PKA Assembly Centers) designated for residents of those localities. In Fresno, the temporary detention center was located at the Fresno Fairgrounds.

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For residents of the Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda area, the WCCA temporary detention center was located at the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno. Dad, his sister, brother-in-law had to sell or store their personal property, gather up whatever they could carry with them, and travel across the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge to San Bruno and the Tanforan Racetrack. The housing and related facilities for the Japanese-American detainees in both Fresno and Tanforan, as well as most other WCCA centers, consisted of horse stables,

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