



Issei and popular Nisei

Before camp, the government spirited all of Japanese America's leaders and potential leaders away, leaving us, who were old enough, to imagine on the horrors they were suffering. Before and during camps, some Issei say, the Nisei were government snitches, and the government made the snitches, the leaders of Japanese America and camp "self-government."

The Japanese who came to America to become Japanese America, were neither passive nor submissive. Had they been, they would not have dared the ocean crossing to enter an American adventure. They could not have turned desert and boulder bound ground into farms that became the envy of the west. It was in the camps that they were taught that all Japanese Americans, Issei and Nisei were aliens, helpless, useless, without rights or hope that were not issued piecemeal by the whites. To survive, Japanese America was taught to live for one purpose: prove themselves worthy to the white racism that had put them in camps. By the end of camp, the Nikkei that had gone in bitter, fearful and disintegrating, were disintegrated, submissive, passive, grateful and gungho for spending the rest of their lives proving themselves worthy.

I was only a kid, neither grateful nor bitter about the concentration camp I knew only as home. Perhaps, that is the worst thing that can be said about the camps. There I was, a happy little experimental rat in a community of laboratory rats, controlled, manipulated, fed, housed and trained by government behavioral engineers who used me, my parents and everyone I knew from one end of the barbed wire world to the other, to play out their Pavlovian sociological fantasies of making us "aliens" live for one purpose: to be acceptable to whites, to make ourselves worthy, as if whites were our god.

For most of us, young and old, white and yellow, keeper and captive alike, who have had a lifetime of work, parenting and big and small accomplishment to place the camp years in perspective, the fear and awe of whites has worn off. At the Days of Remembrance of the camps held at the old assembly centers in Puyallup and Portland, whites and Nikkei joined together, as free people, to remember and begin to heal an American wound. George Townsend, a War Relocation Authority project director at Tule Lake and Minidoka concentration camps, sat with the Issei as a friend, not a god, and loved...not worshipped him for his gesture.

L the Issei

Many of us Nikkei who spent our lives, during the war, outside the camps, proving our "worthiness" by joining the mob in heaping loathing and contempt on the Nikkei inside the camps, still live as if war is on. In Idaho, the Nikkei who were not impounded, went so far as to try to get their state legislature to pass a bill, saying Nikkei outside the barbed wire of Minidoka, were morally and patriotically better than the Japanese Americans inside the barbed wire. These people still fear whites, and are aggressively hush hush about the camps in their state and fear the return of the internees this August 18th. They act as if the whites are still flaming racists. If they were, we would not be returning to Minidoka, 38 years to the day after our first arrival, with our old and our families, and our white friends, to heal the rift between our generations, honor the faith and endurance of our people in hardship, celebrate our history, and make peace with our childhood.

3/chin/MATSUDAIRA

For years, the former internees have kept their bitterness and suffering and histories private, to save their children from the burden of an older generation's bitterness. At Puyallup and Portland, on ground that used to be our concentration camp on the edge of town, we all learned that our stories are not private, our emotions about camp are not merely personal mental disorders. They do not belong bottled up inside individuals bursting from containing horrors, they can't contain. They belong to history. They are shared and released in history, American history.

*October 13*

At Minidoka, ~~August 18~~, we will remember those of us who died in camp with a memorial service at the ~~camp~~ camp rock garden. We will wear our family name and number tags we were required to wear when we traveled from Puyallup and Portland to Minidoka. We will build a replica guard tower, and then, former captives and former keepers will burn the tower down. Whites who once put the tags on us, will collect them from us and throw them into the fire of the burning guard tower. Together we will release each other from the camps, send them into history, and ourselves back home. We can do all of that, because, Minidoka concentration camp was our home. For me, a part of myself, will always be at home in Minidoka. Going back with the old and my family, will make the old home good.

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Here's a little paving the way piece I cho...