

A DIFFERENT KIND OF JAPANESE AMERICAN INTEGRITY

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It is characteristic of minority communities that they suppress their own minority voices in order to present a united front. So it goes in Japanese America, where for for fifty years the party line has gone something like this: we were expelled from our homes in World War II and locked up in desert camps because of our race, but we fought our way to acceptance in our hometowns through our passive submission to incarceration and our heroic sacrifice on the battlefield.

I can't speak for everyone of my generation, the Sansei, third generation, the children of the camps, but I thought the party line stank. It wasn't anything I ever wanted for a heritage. It wasn't anything I could share with friends. It didn't connect me with other Japanese Americans of my age, because the party line isolated each one of us by hinging on a singular premise: that we were nothing without white acceptance.

Our books celebrated this theme of our steady march towards assimilation and white acceptance: Nisei: The Quiet Americans, Americans in Disguise. I searched those books as a young man growing up in Santa Clara for something, anything, that showed a little backbone, a love of community so strong it would have rejected accomodation to racial prejudice and wartime hysteria, and made a statement for Japanese American integrity. But those of us who asked questions were quickly told our passions were misplaced, that times were different then. S.I. Hayakawa accused us of trying to mimic blacks.



Then through scholars outside the community I discovered there were men living all around me in San Jose and Mountain View who in 1944 had taken a stand against injustice and said no more. They were the 85 men who as youngsters had refused to be drafted out of the American concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, until their rights as citizens were first restored and their parents released from camp. They risked prison terms of five to thirty years at hard labor, and served average sentences of two years each. They were inspired by leaders of a group called the Fair Play Committee, whose motto was "One for All -- All for One," and whose bulletins bristled with references to Abraham Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal protection under the law. They were the sons of farmers and orchardists who learned the Constitution at school.

For their principles the resisters were branded as disloyal, as draft dodgers, or worse. In a community that had chosen the good publicity of military service over good law, the resisters posed a threat to postwar acceptance. They were ostracized and written out of the histories of Japanese America written by Japanese Americans for the past fifty years.

Enough is enough. This coming Friday, May 29th, we're welcoming home the Heart Mountain draft resisters with their first group meeting before a hometown audience, in connection with the Ninth National Conference of the Association of Asian American Studies at San Jose State University. The community is invited to meet the resisters and hear for itself the purpose, history and accomplishment of the largest organized resistance inside American's wartime internment camps.



The resisters themselves, people like Mits Koshiyama, Dave Kawamoto and George Uyeda, say they didn't expect to be remembered until fifty years after their death. Some still would prefer it that way. Even now, most still decline to be identified in public, for fear of exposing their families to renewed hostility from their own kind. That's powerful testimony to the strength of the stigma attached to taking principled but unpopular stands in the world that is Japanese America. The party line dies hard.

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