why I like the Heart Mtn draft resisters

I was amazed to discover some time ago that I grew up in what was once a hotbed of Japanese American resistance to wartime incarceration. I was not surprised that this knowledge had been denied me by the unofficial keepers of Japanese American history.

I already knew the existing histories of Japanese America written by Bill Hosokawa and Budd Fukei were phony. I already knew from working for redress in Seattle that the real stories are only told in private, from the unpleasant fact of government informants inside camp to the betrayal of the

But to learn of an organized resistance movement at the camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, and to learn that those families came from the San Jose - Mountain View area where I was raised, both cheered and upset me. I was angry that I had to grow up there stumbling around the 60's in the culturally-arid suburb of Santa Clara, without the benefit of a real history that could legitimize the feelings of outrage that every Sansei feels the moment he or she finally understands what happened with the camps. Here was the answer to every Nisei who says, "You don't know what it was like. You weren't there." Here were men who believed the Constitution they were taught in school and decided the camps were wrong and said they would refuse induction into the Army until their rights were first restored and their parents released from camp. There was nothing complicated about their principles.

I was angry the resisters?lived their lives in obscurity just miles from me, and I never had the chance to go say hello and say I respected what they did. I went back to San Jose to seek out those families. I was again floored to discover that my mother knew some of these guys from Japanese folk-singing class. That some were gardeners, like my father. They went to some of the same schools as my father. Ordinary guys, not misfits, not oddballs. Not the draft-dodgers and disloyals and delinquents that they were called by the wartime Japanese American Citizens League and the JACL- and government-run Heart Mountain Sentinel newspaper -- edited, before his departure, by Seattle's Bill Hosokawa.

Mits Koshiyama, George Nozawa, Dave Kawamoto, George Uyeda -- they all thought they would not be remembered until fifty years after their death. Grace Kubota was glad to have her father remembered as the only Issei member of the Fair Play Committee who went to prison because he liked what the Nisei were doing.

Now my father starts talking. Now he tells me how he read the editorials of Bainbridge Island native Jimmie Omura, publisher in Denver of the Rocky Shimpo, throwing out a lifeline to the resisters and encouraging them to organize and stand firm. He tells me of the boys who disagreed with the JACL program and overdosed on shoyu before their draft physicals, hoping the salt would raise their blood pressure too high. And my father comes

into focus for me too, as someone who would spend precious money to subscribe to a newspaper that introduced critical thinking and dissent to a camp where thought was controlled, where thought was potentially dangerous, where the wrong thoughts could lead to segregation, and ostracization.

The resisters have been ostracized and written out of the histories of Japanese America written by Japanese Americans. That offends me, and that's what drives me to want to capture them on tape, to tell their story. To tell their story is to triumph over the Japanese American party line, the one that says we may have become pariahs after Pearl Harbor, but we proved our loyalty and won our way back to acceptance through passive submission to incarceration and noble duty in segregated combat. With no disservice to those who fought, it's the language of victimization.

Twenty-five years ago the children of my generation born after the camps naively demanded of their parents, "Why didn't you resist?" It was a dumb question, borne of enforced ignorance. A lot of us felt so embarassed at our ignorance, we bought into the party line and agreed that submission and willful cooperation was the only choice.

No one looks to see that other voices told us there was another choice -- cooperation under protest. The voices come from 1942, from James Omura to the Tolan Committee in San Francisco:

The voices come from within the JACL, in failed resolutions demanding the JACL acknowlege and even apologize for its betrayal of the resistance, a resolution turned into a bland acknowledgement that the resistance existed, and pitting the good and "patriotic" Heart Mountain boys against unseen and unnamed "bad" draft resisters presumably motivated by more selfish interests.

Now that we know more, the critical question is not "Why didn't you resist?" but "Why did you turn your backs on those who chose to resist?" The answer is telling. Set the FPC bulletins and the JACL Creed side by side, You'll see both are statements of loyalty and ?patriotism, but one is also a statement of ajapense american integrity in the face of oppresion, the other a state ment of accomodation and a plea for acceptance and assimiliation. I want to be accepted as much as next guy, but not at the price of my history, lierature and culture

Why was I not surprised to learn that the resistance was suppressed not just by the goverrnment, but by our own people.

James Omura didn't expect to be remembered for what he did until fifty years after his death. Mits Koshiyama

I was proud that the Asian American Journalists Association could have the vision to honor Jimmie.?

In San Jose last May we heard a different story, from the

James Omura of Bainbridge Island was the lone voice

They protested. I thought that was a good thing. Others thought it was a bad thing to protest. Leaders warned, "do not irritate the Army." They were afraid

The Nisei now say it is nonsense to think that we could have all resisted. But look at the evidence of what happened when one man did. When Bainbridge Island native James Omura told the Tolan Committee he oppposed evacuation, he was branded "public enemy number one" of the JACL. Not

All George had in mind was 12 people in a room. He still feels its dangerous. afraid to come out.

felt it was dangerous

These aren't the more problematic Kibei or renunciants or even the no-no boys. These were young men who

These guys lived and worked in the orchards on which the suburban subdivision I was raised was built. By the time we moved from Ohio to Santa Clara, the resisters were living in obscurity, as school gardeners, as construction contractors, as restauranteurs. My father was a gardener. These guys could have been my uncles. My mother knew Kozie socially. My stepfather trades jokes and memories with them.

These guys aren't in the books, especially not the ones written by Japanese Americans.

I don't know many of the Nisei coming to the Sea-Tac Red Lion for Heart Mountain Reunion IV this month (September). From their schedule it's apparent they're coming to eat, dance, and golf. They're not spending hundreds of dollars each to reclaim lost history, not that they should. None of the resisters I know were invited to

An insider confides, "they don't want anything controversial."

Think about it. That people who stood for everything that was American and patriotic can be considered controversial, is testimony to the power of the party line.

Frank Abe is a reporter for KIRO News. He is independently producing a video documentary on the Heart Mountain resistance. The project seeks wartime photos of the Fair Play Committee,

especially Min Tamesa, and the individual resisters. Frank can be reached at 722-3482 or through KIRO at 728-5497.