

THE HEART MOUNTAIN FAIR PLAY COMMITTEE (A Resisters Account)

The mess-hall was the unofficial heart and activity center of each half-block in the Heart Mountain "relocation" camp. Each half-block was the mirror image of its other half, each with its own mess-hall, latrines, laundry room and recreation hall, serving the inhabitants of 12 barracks each, (about 270 per $\frac{1}{2}$ blk.). For all practical purposes, each half functioned as an entity in itself.

Generally, each individual was assigned to the mess-hall in which his barrack was located. Exceptions were pre-arranged where ones work-place made it impractical to eat at his own mess-hall and the necessary adjustments made to insure the food served would always be in balance with the supplies delivered to each mess-hall. On occasion, when one would be tempted to eat at a neighboring mess-hall because they had an expert chef or perhaps prettier servers, he would soon earn hostile glares from the regulars, as he proceeded to eat someone else's dinner. The threat of public humiliation was found to be an effective deterrent and behavior modifier in this artificially contrived community.

The mess-hall, because of its spaciousness and relative accessibility (by-passing formal permits from white administrators and dealing directly with more sympathetic internee managers), became the logical site for spontaneous meetings and other internee activities. Almost every family had at least one member on the kitchen crew so it became an unofficial secondary communications center via the grape-vine, especially since the camp newspaper, the Sentinel, was known to be heavily pro-administration and not to be trusted. However, the political leanings varied from mess-hall to mess-hall. None-the-less they became the "home-turf" of the internees. It is not surprising then, that the mess-halls would become the birthplace of the Fair Play Committee.

Early in 1943, the infamous "loyalty" questionnaire was circulated, causing much confusion, anger and speculation. The Fair Play Committee which I was vaguely aware of (if in fact it even existed then), warned it could be a precursor to introducing the military draft into the camps. It could imply a willingness to volunteer if answered carelessly. I wasn't particularly alarmed and reasoned that perhaps this was yet another bumbling attempt by the government to determine our trustworthiness, a prelude to our clearance. However, if I did have sinister intentions, why couldn't I simply answer yes to the two crucial questions and have a rifle thrust into my hands? How convenient. On the other hand, if I answered no, out of anger or spite, I might jeopardize whatever was left of my citizen status. Also, it might tend to justify the

governments wholesale detention program as a reasonable wartime contingency. None of it made much sense. I finally heeded the FPC mimeographed warning and answered a conditional yes to question 27 and a simple yes to 28, after-all, I did wave a Japanese flag when visiting Japan when I was 5 years old.

They were right, of course. Early in 1944, without further hearings nor explanations, my draft classification was changed from 4-C to 1-A. It was a relief to know I was no longer considered sinister, but the condition of the reinstatement of my civil rights seemed to have been ignored.

I was quite determined that I could not, in good conscience, bear arms under the existing conditions. But I also had trepidations about protesting alone. What good would it do? I decided to attend an FPC meeting, which were becoming quite frequent as some registrants were already getting their pre-induction notices.

As I approached the mess-hall building, I noticed the absence of the usual clatter of dishes, pots and pans. There were no familiar shrieks of children nor incessant chatter of gossip. Also missing was the pungent aroma of steaming rice, home-made takuan and not-so-fresh fish. which would escape every time someone would open a door to enter or leave. There was only a deep rumbling of subdued voices, interrupted occasionally by the squeal of a table or bench dragging on the concrete floor. I entered the smoke filled room, searching for familiar faces. Not finding any, I settled into an open space between two strangers on a hard wooden bench near the back of the room. I noticed my glasses didn't fog up as they usually do when entering the steamy mess-hall on cold evenings. All the important players were sitting at two ten foot tables, abutted end to end, at the front of the room where the serving counter acted as a barrier between the kitchen and the larger dining area. Papers were being shuffled back and forth among those at the front table and occasionally one would lean back to consult with someone behind him on a particular issue or terminology. Sitting so far back, and with all the smoke in the room, I couldn't see very well, but I didn't mind. I was here primarily to hear, not see. Besides, close access to the rear door was reassuring, in case I didn't like what I was to hear.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man (everyone seems to be middle-aged or elderly when you're 20), rather slight of build, but with a voice of one twice his size, stood and announced, in no uncertain terms, the start of the meeting, ending abruptly and forever, many unfinished sentences in the now crowded room. Perhaps I exaggerate a bit in describing Kiyoshi Okamoto, but he was so atypical of the quiet, contained Japanese image, I was immediately enthralled by his demeanor,

his forthrightness, animation and (hopefully) his sincerity. His language was brutally crude, sprinkled generously with four letter expletives, but the content was essentially an articulation of my own deeper thoughts, values and feelings. Further, he had an impressive knowledge of constitutional law, indispensable in any civil-rights forum. Other speakers followed, but I don't recall much of what was said. I was busy in my own head, separating the seed from the chaff, wondering if I had heard correctly.

I attended other meetings, at one of which I paid a two dollar fee and was placed on the growing membership roster. The meetings were held in various mess-halls whose managers were amenable to the cause (not all were). Each time I sat a little closer to the front table. I grew to respect all the leaders (the steering committee), as principled individuals who knowingly jeopardized their, and their families welfare, in an effort to regain the dignity of all internees. Most were too old for the draft, or had dependents which would get them easy deferments. One wasn't even a U.S. citizen, but was concerned with the plight of those who were.

On about March 16 I received my notice to report for a physical exam prior to induction. Many thoughts ran through my head. I regarded the notice as yet another insult, the first being the curfew which now seemed so long ago. How could I continue to go along with this morally corrupt charade? I was being asked, not to serve in defense of my country, but in a war of aggression in foreign lands, ostensibly for principles I was denied here at home. Further, it was presented as an opportunity to "prove my loyalty". Something was seriously amiss.

Should I take shoyu? Rumors were that some of the fellows were flunking their medical exams by taking heavy doses of shoyu just before their exams. Pop works in the mess-hall and they probably wouldn't miss a few bottles anyway. But, how do I ask him? And even if he consents, which he probably won't, would I ever be able to look him in the face again? ---Ever??

At the next FPC meeting I sat at a front table, next to that of the steering committee. It was at a previous meeting that Frank Emi suggested there was enough rhetoric and it was time to take a stand. The vote was almost unanimous that a test case be initiated to determine the status of our citizenship and a clarification of our rights and obligations therein. The group had escalated from a passive protest forum to one of active resistance. The crowd, at this point was well over the fire restriction capacity for the building, perhaps by as much as 50%. (400+,-). They were mostly young Nisei men with a scattering of Issei parents and a very few women.

In the course of the meeting they called for a show of hands of those who received their pre-induction notices since the last meeting. Several, perhaps a dozen including myself, raised our hands. They asked me, perhaps because I was at the closest table, what I intended to do about it. I stood up and explained I was instructed to be on the bus to Powell on the morning of the 23rd. Then I found myself declaring I would not be on that bus. There was a sudden cheer that rattled the windows and startled me. I felt a million eyes on me and as exhilarating as it was, my knees began to buckle. I was thankful to sit down. There were others standing, followed by cheers and a few who had not decided, followed by "aarghs" of disappointment. I wondered how many who had received their notices were reluctant to even raise their hands.

For me, I had passed the point of no return. It was cast in stone. There would be no turning back.

yosh kuromiya

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