

We, the Ten Thousand: The Japanese Internment at Camp Minidoka

JONATHAN SHIPLEY traces the suffering and survival of Seattle's Japanese community through the pages of its English-language newspapers.

YEARS BEFORE PEARL HARBOR exploded with the firepower of Japanese military might on December 7, 1941, and 2,402 people were killed, a man and his wife started a newspaper in Seattle, Washington. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto had yet to launch his surprise strike on the U.S. Pacific Fleet as James Sakamoto set to work typing the initial stories for the *Japanese-American Courier*, the first English-language Japanese newspaper in the U.S. Years before the United States declared war on the empire of Japan as the destroyed USS *Arizona* sank to the bottom of the harbour off Oahu, Sakamoto was putting the finishing touches on layout, ready to print the paper's first issue.

It was 1928 when the first issue hit the streets. Sakamoto and his wife Misao were pillars in Seattle's burgeoning Japanese community. Sakamoto had been born in Seattle. He had attended Franklin High School. "Jimmie," as he was called, was a star football player for the mighty Quakers team. He graduated in 1921 and immediately became interested in politics and current events, active in blocking anti-Asian legislation in his home state of Washington. These efforts were to no avail, but the spark for doing right in his community burned. He moved to New Jersey, working as an editor for the *Japanese-American Commercial Weekly*. He had boxed professionally and played semi-professional baseball. In 1927 he returned to Seattle, blinded during his short-lived boxing career.

But he realized the need for a newspaper in the "Emerald City." Borrowing some money from his father, he started his four-page weekly. Soon, it had a voice. "He was a preaching militant," remembered writer and editor Bill Hosokawa, "[with] unquestioning loyalty to the United



A sculpture in Eugene, Oregon, recalls the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans in 1942.

Peter Mitham photo

States [and] to second-generation Americans." By 1929, Sakamoto had helped to found Seattle's Japanese American Citizens League.

A little more than a decade later, like Pearl Harbor that morning, his world, and the lives of Seattle's Japanese, exploded. These included Sanzo Murakami and his wife, Matsuyo, owners of the popular Higo Variety Store in

Seattle's Japantown; Monica Sone, a young girl; pregnant Amelia Kito; Fumio Shibata; and pharmacist Yoshio Hanmarito and college student Mary Toribara. Their lives exploded with repercussions they couldn't fathom.



Japanese Americans were relocated to internment camps across the western U.S. Peter Mitham photo

On December 8, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke to a joint session of Congress, declaring war against Japan. Everyone in Seattle within earshot of a radio heard his address, which was broadcast in homes, businesses and schools. Within 12 minutes the U.S. House of Representatives voted for war—388 for, 1 against.

SUSPICION RAINS DOWN ON COMMUNITY

And so it began—citizens of Seattle, those born in Japan as well as those born in America and who were, therefore, citizens of the United States, were deemed suspicious or worse, enemies of the country they called home. Washington's governor, Arthur Langlie, issued a statement. "The State of Washington is on the frontier of a great war. We do not know what trials we must go through or what sacrifices we will be called upon to make. We do know what is at stake. We know that our country, our liberties and our very homes are threatened." None more, it turned out, than Seattle's Japanese, who were deemed both enemies and a threat.

People such as attorney William Nimbue; bank clerk Tejuri Umino; "Lefty" Ichihara, the beloved owner of the local fishing tackle shop; jazz musician Koichi Hayashi; and schoolchildren.

James Sakamoto wrote in his newspaper, "There is a remote possibility of our becoming the victim of public passion and hysteria." He continued, resolutely, "If this should occur, we will stand firm in our resolution that even if America may 'disown' us—we will never disown America."

And disowned they were, as suspicion fell on Seattle's streets like rain. On the night of the Pearl Harbor attack, local police, according to the *Seattle Star*, "rounded up 51 Japanese aliens considered dangerous by the Federal Bureau of Investigation." Those placed in custody included Sakamoto's associates and friends at the Japanese Chamber of Commerce. Seattle's mayor, William "Earl" Millikan, issued the following statement: "I . . . want to warn the Japanese that they must not congregate or make any utterance that could be used as grounds for reprisals." And the rains fell. Japantown became heavily patrolled by police. Youths were hassled and physically assaulted. Businesses suffered. The Higo Variety Store grew silent. Then, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066.

The order cleared the way to relocate the Japanese, citizens like Sakamoto and the rest, to internment camps. Nationwide, 120,000 Japanese would be interned. Sixty-two percent were Nisei (American-born, second-generation Japanese Americans) or Sansei (third generation). The rest were Issei (Japanese immigrants and resident aliens). The order applied to anyone of "foreign enemy ancestry," but only 11,000 Germans and 3,000 Italians were ever interned.

BANISHED TO "CAMP HARMONY"

It was a whirlwind, the change in the lives of Seattle's Japanese residents. In a blink, the lives of men, women and children were changed. By April 1942, signs were posted in Seattle instructing the Japanese on their pending removal from cities and towns, farms and hamlets across the Puget Sound region. They were to be removed from society. By the end of April they were living in temporary housing at fairgrounds in Puyallup, and they stayed there as Camp Minidoka rose in the desolation of southern Idaho.

The temporary internment camp at Puyallup was called Camp Harmony. Here they lived in barracks by the Ferris wheel. They took communal showers in the shadow of a roller coaster and slept near paddocks for farm animals. Seven thousand lived there, Sakamoto and his wife among them. In a Japanese evacuation report in May, Joseph Conrad of the Seattle office of the American Friends Service Committee wrote that the camp afforded “no privacy, little human decency.” (Across the border in Vancouver, British Columbia, almost three times this number of Japanese Canadians were being held under similarly dismal conditions in barns at the Pacific National Exhibition grounds. See page 18.)

By August 1942, Camp Harmony was empty. The temporary residents had been sent to Idaho, a 27-hour train ride behind closed blinds to an unknown location. “We have learned many lessons the hard way during our stay at Camp Harmony,” Sakamoto editorialized in the final “souvenir” edition of the *Camp Harmony Newsletter*. “Let us profit by them as we face the difficulties that are bound to develop when we reach our new home at the Minidoka Project in Idaho.” He continued, “These are, indeed, times that try men’s souls, and the test of courage in accepting the challenge lies within ourselves.” They would live at Camp Minidoka for three years, until the war ended.

MAKING AN OASIS AT CAMP MINIDOKA

In volume 1, issue 1 of the *Minidoka Irrigator*, the newspaper created and run by the interned, project director Harry L. Stafford wrote, “I deeply appreciate the cooperation of the colonists of this center in meeting the chaotic conditions which presently exist.” Sakamoto and others—colonists. “It is only a matter of a few weeks,” Stafford continued, “when the construction work will be completed and we can begin planning improvements to our community.”

They all settled into their new home. With editors Dick Takeuchi, Dyke Miyagawa and Rube Hosokawa at the helm, the newspaper introduced itself: “The state on which the IRRIGATOR introduces itself is 68,000 acres of

untamed desert.” Minidoka, they continued, “is a vast stretch of sagebrush stubble and shifting, swirling sand—a dreary, forbidding, flat expanse of arid wilderness . . . We are here to stay until the Twentieth Century tyranny is routed from its seats of power in the Axis capitals.” They wrote, “We, the ten thousand, then, can have but one resolve, to apply our combined energies and efforts to the grim task of conquering the elements and converting a wasteland into an inhabitable community.” And they did. “Our goal is the creation of an oasis.” And they made one. “Our future will depend on what we make it.” And they made it.

The first issue of the *Irrigator* was published on September 10, 1942. Tak Hirai and Karl Fujimoto were staff artists. Thomas Yamauchi was circulation manager. Gertrude Takayama, Shizuko Kawamura and Takako Matsumoto did the typing. Six pages long, the paper offered up news bits. “First Wed” highlighted Minidoka’s first wedding (Dan Kita and Mary Fujia). “50 Cops Pound Dusty Beat,” read a headline. “Schools to Open October 1,” read another. “New Post Office Will Open Doors ‘Any Day Now,’ ” announced the paper. “Library Will Be Housed in High School.”

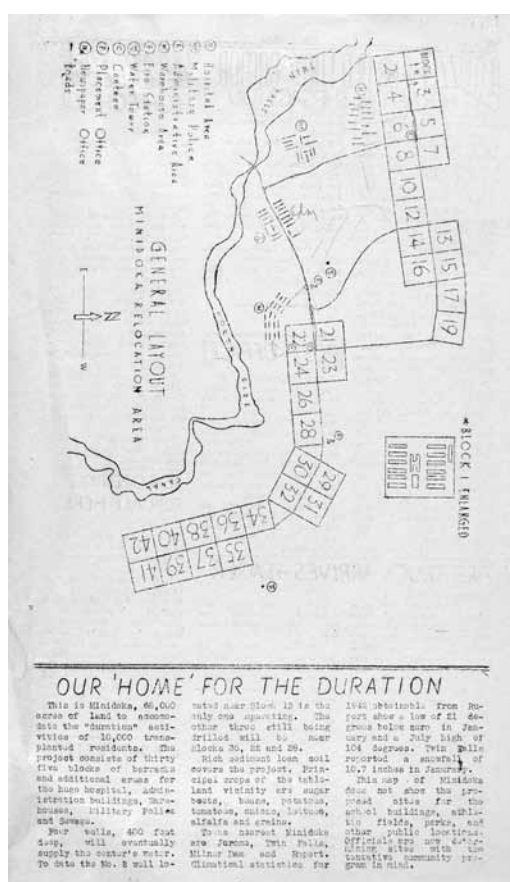
“Minidoka is not Camp Harmony or North Portland,” the newspaper reported a week later. “Minidoka is much more than all that. It is an idea, a young idea. It is hope and patience. It is courage. Minidoka is unselfishness. It is a story which will be told over and over again years from now.”

And life continued. Mass choir rehearsals began. There were funeral services for Private Eugene Hayashi. The on-site hospital got ambulances. The dance band played “Sleepy Lagoon” for a group of onion pickers. The Reverend Tsotomu Fukuyama sermonized, “What Is God Doing?” A shoe repair shop opened with much fanfare. Yuji Mochizuki’s poem “A New Challenge” read, in part,

The prairie wind of this desert land
Rushed along the beaten path
And danced along the project grounds.

For New Year celebrations, 10,000 pounds of *mochi-gome* (a type of rice) was ordered, as were 3,300 pounds of English walnuts, 36 sacks of red pinto beans and 4,500 pounds of turkey.

By 1944 the paper had transformed from a do-it-yourself newsletter to a full-blown newspaper with regular columns, bus schedules, advertisements. Sterling Jewelry Company in Twin Falls advertised its leather cigarette cases. Young's Dairy touted its pasteurized milk. Alexander's Suits had a sale on suits—\$35 each.



The first issue of the Minidoka Irrigator included a map of the camp.

And life continued. The movie *Captain Fury* was screened at Recreation Hall 34. Kimi Takatsuka was crowned "Sweetheart of Minidoka." Fifty-eight Nisei, it was reported,

were awarded the Order of the Purple Heart for wounds received in action. Mark Hiratsuka enlisted. Little Myrtle Yamanishi charmed colonists as a talented majorette. There's a photo of her throwing a baton. Shin Sato was killed in action on the French front. Four residents received injuries after being tossed from a work truck. Edward Ogawa died on the fields of France.

The No Names football team lost 13–0 to the Area A men. The Jerome Bakery sold its devil's food cake for 60 cents. Mr. Seko placed a classified ad in the paper hoping to recover his lost Lifetime Schaeffer fountain pen. Hideo Onudo won the Bronze Star for meritorious service in combat on the Fifth Army front in Italy. Sergeant George Sawado died in Italy. Students graduated from Hunt High School. There was word, in June 1945, of a resettlement council forming in Seattle. With the war nearing an end, would residents of Camp Minidoka be able to return to Seattle?

During the publication run of the *Minidoka Irrigator*, James Sakamoto's presence is invisible in its pages. His name doesn't appear on the masthead. The last issues, professional in appearance, were published every Saturday in nearby Jerome. The paper cost readers outside the compound six cents an issue. Sakamoto never became editor, sports writer, business manager, printer. He lived in Minidoka but his work with the newspaper, if he did any, isn't mentioned. He lived there, though, and undoubtedly read the paper behind the fences and wire, lookouts and guns.

The July 28, 1945, edition reads, "As the days of the Minidoka Relocation Center is [sic] drawn inevitably to a close, the *Irrigator* finally succumbing to the effects of relocation, is signing its final thirty to its pages." It continued, "Since the *Irrigator* made its first appearance on September 10, 1942 in mimeograph form, it has grown progressively to its present printed format." It added, "As the days of the relocation centers draw to an end . . ., these evacuees who have been tried and found not wanting are once again returning to America to pick of the thread of life that was so ruthlessly broken." The editorial concluded: "The majority of real Americans

who believe and practice the Democratic ideals are rooting for us. Let us take a deep breath and girding ourselves, bid a fond farewell to that gray barrack city of Hunt and pray that never again will another group be made to open its gates again.”

NOTHING LEFT TO RETURN TO

With the gates of Minidoka closed, the gates of Seattle opened again, but only a crack. By January 1945 Japanese residents began returning to the city. Yet their home was home no longer. It had changed. So had they. Doug Chin remarked that the evacuation “resulted in financial disaster, turmoil, hardships for virtually every family.” Shiegeko Uno said, “After the war, Japantown was no longer there.” Within a week of returning to his home and shop, the Higo Variety Store, Sanzo Murakami died of a heart attack in his back office. Many didn’t return at all. There was nothing left to return to. Their jobs were gone. Their homes and farms were owned by others. Their belongings had long been sold or been given or thrown away.

James Sakamoto, the proud founder of a newspaper, and his wife returned to the Pacific Northwest in July 1945. He couldn’t find the finances to restart his newspaper. He lived on government assistance. Sakamoto found a job managing the Pick-Up and Telephone Solicitation Department for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. On December 5, 1955, while he was walking to work, he was struck by a car and died.

His papers live at the University of Washington. His story, like the 110,000 others nationally, lives on in our collective history.

Minidoka is now a National Historic Site. Internees included composer Paul Chihara, civil rights pioneer Takuji Yamashita and writer Mitsuye Yamada. “It made you feel that you knew what it was like to die,” remembered



By 1945, the design of the Minidoka Irrigator resembled that of newspapers outside the camp.

internee Margaret Takahashi, “to go somewhere you couldn’t take anything but what you had inside you. And so . . . it strengthened you.”

~ Jonathan Shipley is a freelance writer based on Vashon Island, WA. He last wrote on Pacific Northwest brewery ephemera in *Amphora* 156.