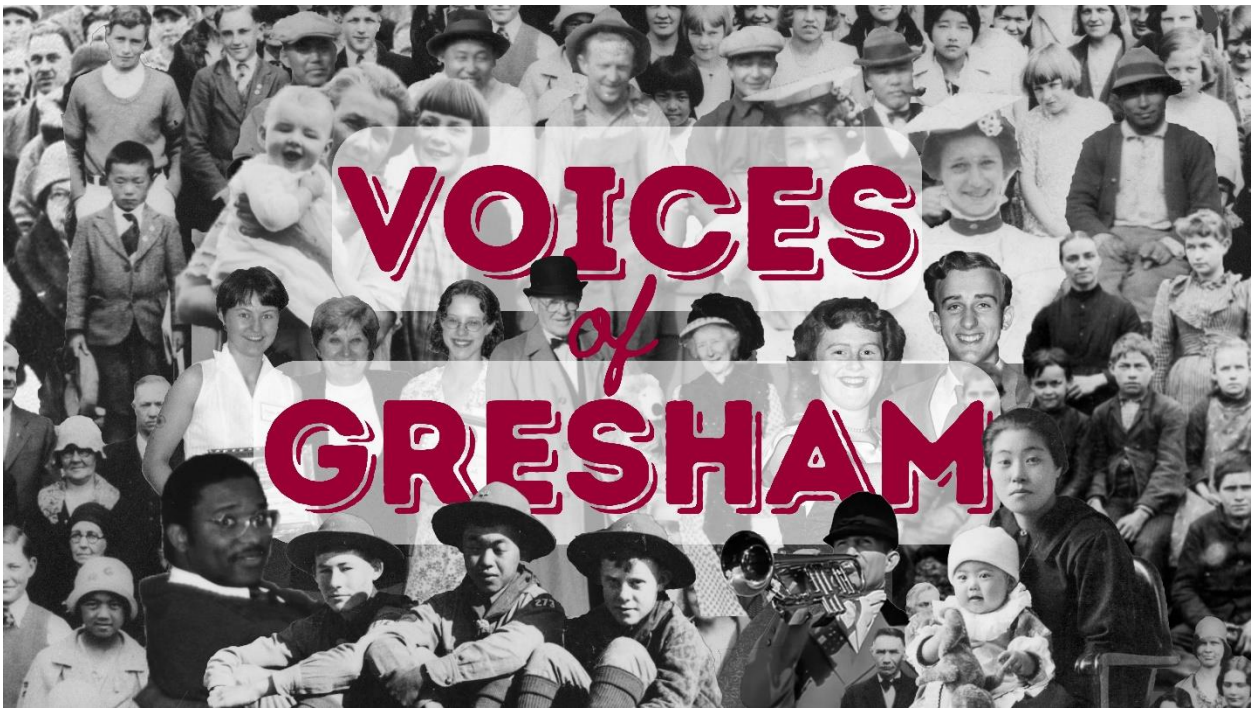

Voices of Gresham Podcast

Episode 3: Road to Minidoka

Transcript

Welcome to Voices of Gresham, a podcast about the history of Gresham told through the voices of those who have lived it. I'm your host, Stephanie Vallance, public historian at the Gresham Historical Society.

MUSIC

Life during World War II was tenuous for Japanese Americans, even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Prejudice and discrimination against Asian immigrants was an accepted part of American life. World War II only made it worse.

In 1941, Japan joined the Axis powers, and Americans with Japanese heritage were held in suspicion. Minoru Yasui, who would later gain fame for challenging the constitutionality of Japanese internment, saw the writing on the wall. In February, 1940, two years prior to the Executive Order 9066, the Oregonian newspaper published an interview with Min Yasui, "to present the story of Oregon's Japanese as seen through Japanese eyes," knowing that, "numerous Japanese in Oregon have faced peculiar difficulties by reason of their race…and because of public antipathy to the…war." The Oregonian asked Yasui if he encountered difficulties in his personal life in Oregon because of the war and if it was tough to be an American citizen with Japanese ancestors. This is how he responded. "First, let me say that I am not sorry for myself or the bulk of my race in Oregon.

For myself, I am happy in my American citizenship, and I am proud of the record that members of my race have…in the upbuilding of Oregon." Yasui was tactful and strategic in his response, allowing that yes, many of his Issei family members had experienced hardships and prejudice, but that they were tenacious and persevered and were integral in the development of the state. To prove how long Japanese immigrants had been in Oregon, he pointed to Shintaro Takaki and his wife Tama, the daughter of Miyo Iwakoshi.

"They now live at Orient," he is quoted as saying, "not far from the site of the old mill, and they look forward to celebrating their golden wedding anniversary." In signaling to Tama and Shintaro, Yasui seemed to be pointing out the longevity of Japanese-American influence in the state. The first Japanese wedding between Miyo's daughter and a Japanese merchant in Oregon had taken place nearly 50 years prior. Reading between the lines, Yasui might have been reminding white American readers that Japanese immigrants had been a part of the frontier West longer than many of them had been alive. Tama and Shintaro were important symbols of Japanese tenacity – the ability to not only survive hardship and pioneer life, but to thrive in hostile lands.

In 1940, when the article was published, Tama and Shintaro were still living in Orient, close to the spot Mio and Andrew McKinnon had settled six decades prior. But just two years after the publication of the interview with Min Yasui, Tama and Shintaro would be forced to leave the state of Oregon, never to return. Yasui's assurance to Oregonian readers that, "we nisei are American citizens and we think of ourselves only as Americans," was likely helpful for a time. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, even Minoru Yasui couldn't stop the intensity of suspicion and prejudice that enveloped the country.

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Almost immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, America declared war on the Japanese. On the home front, many white Americans waged a patriotic battle against anyone with Japanese ancestry. There were calls for action against Japanese Americans living on the West Coast and demands that all West Coast Japanese be detained so that they would be unable to aid the enemy. It didn't matter that nearly two-thirds of those who qualified as Japanese American were American citizens, born on American soil. Anyone who had Japanese ancestry was under suspicion.

Annell Carlson is a retired Gresham teacher and lifelong Gresham resident. She was eight when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Her best friend in the third grade was Korean, but her family still experienced the anti-Japanese feeling that spread through town.

[Annell Carlson] **When my friend Mae, she told me, just – not too long ago, we talked about this – she said, "When my dad came to Gresham, he had to be very careful because people would accost him on the street and say, why are you here? And he would have to say, I'm Korean, not Japanese."**

The war heightened American prejudice against German Americans and Italian Americans, but the racism directed against Japanese Americans was particularly vicious. The intense response culminated in the forced removal and unconstitutional incarceration of 120,000

residents of Japanese ancestry. This racism was precipitated by the attack on Pearl Harbor, but it had deep antecedents in the nearly half-century of legal, social, and economic policies directed against Asians in general within the United States. In Gresham, Japanese families, along with those all over the state, waited to find out their fates. For many, they had toiled and saved for decades, sacrificing for the future. Families like the Ouchidas were just beginning to see the fruits of their labor. Roy Ouchida's parents had just made several new and expensive upgrades.

[Roy Ouchida] **Somewhere between '40 and '41, the house got electrified. We had lights – no more kerosene lanterns. We got rid of the cast iron wood stove because Mom got an electric range. And then we got rid of the ice box and the ice man delivery because we had now, oh, a refrigerator. And then, also, we had a Maytag clothes washer.**

The upgrades and purchases Roy's family made would have saved his family significant physical energy, time, and money. However, when rumors started swirling that Japanese-Americans may be forced from their homes, it meant their new purchases would be useless. Roy's father had to pivot quickly.

[Roy Ouchida] **I simply remember my father going to the Gresham Fairgrounds, which is out here. And it seemed to me he was going to weekly evening meetings, and he'd come up with some information. And he must have gotten some kind of information, because there was talk about, we might go to a camp. So, what was happening was, my father was buying lightweight cookware, because he figured he couldn't take heavy cast iron things. So he bought lightweight cookware. I remember this one little thing. It was a cup. This cup was made of aluminum, but it was collapsible.**

Roy's parents had some warning, but many questions remained throughout the spring of 1942. Executive Order 9066 authorized the forced removal of issei and nisei from designated military zones, which eventually encompassed nearly the entire West Coast. The evacuation order was released on April 28, 1942, under the direction of the army and the Oregon National Guard.

[Roy Ouchida] **We didn't know all the rules until that April order came down, said, okay folks, you've got seven days. So that's when we had to start getting rid of everything, selling everything, give everything away.**

Because Japanese families were told to bring with them only what they could carry, Roy's parents sold everything they could, although no one bought the brand-new tractor. It was just too expensive to offload quickly. Ray Shiiki was a guest on local talk show *I Remember When* with Gwenda McCall. He described how little families were able to take with them.

[Ray Shiiki] **But we knew ahead of time that we're supposed to meet at the Gresham High School with our belongings – whatever we could carry, I guess, or bedding and clothing. And that's all about all we were able to take at the time. Everything else had to be either stored with friends, or sold, or whatever. And I think most of them sold**

what they could. And a lot of the things that they couldn't sell, they had to just leave behind.

Roy's parents were unable to recoup much of what they had spent. But for Roy, only eight years old at the time, his own personal losses were equally devastating.

[Roy Ouchida] **For me, I had to give away all my toys. And my mom told me that you can bring anything you want so long as it fits in your little cigar box. I still have that box. Carried it to Portland Assembly Center. I carried it up to Idaho. I carried it over to Vale, Oregon. I carried it over to Boring, Oregon. Carried it back over to Pleasant Valley. And since it made it there, it kind of had a permanent home, so it was not disturbed much anymore. So it survived. There wasn't much in there. I do remember I had a two-bladed small pen knife. I had a dollar pocket watch that no longer worked, but I kept that. I think I had a little lead Hubley toy car and a toy truck. And other than that, I don't remember what all else I had in there. Not much else would fit, actually.**

Japanese families around Oregon were required to report to the Portland Assembly Center by May 5, 1942. There was widespread public support for the relocation. However, some Gresham families were heartbroken for their Japanese neighbors. Carol Andrews was a young girl when her neighbors, the Shiikis, told her they would be leaving.

[Carol Andrews] **Well, I remember the Shiikis had to go to the internment camp, and I mean, that was a big, big deal.**

Carol had been close with the Shiikis all her life, playing with the younger children and being babysat by the older Shiiki girls. Her parents, the Hoffmeisters, were horrified and joined other Greshamites in attending an anti-internment meeting.

[Carol Andrews] **Well, I know we went to a meeting someplace in Gresham on Cleveland Avenue. It was a big building, a lot of people there, you know, protesting that they were going. I remember them singing 'God Bless America' very loud."**

Despite the support of the Hoffmeisters and others, the pro-internment sentiment was way too strong, and the Shiikis, along with all other Japanese families, had to say their goodbyes.

[Carol Andrews] **And they told me, now we're leaving on such and such a day at such a time. We'll go past your house with our trucks and what belongings you have – they had – and be out by the road. They're up on the bank, and we'll wave – we'll honk the horn and wave, you know. And they did that. But, and I do remember, the Shiikis brought a lot of their knickknacks, different things and stored them in our barn. I remember them going. I remember going down to the stockyards after they had gone to the stockyards a day or so, and they were all behind barbed wire fences and crying. And we were crying.**

Some families took buses from Gresham High School. Others were driven. None had any idea what would happen to them, where they would end up, or what to expect. With the few worldly possessions they could carry, they entered a facility surrounded by barbed wire and

armed guards. Barracks had been hastily built on the grounds of Portland's Pacific International Livestock Expo.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **And they were built on top of the horse stalls, and it was really hot. And the one story that I'd hear over and over – it was really hot, so people put water sprinklers on the roof and started to – and when they did that, all the horse manure started to soften, and everyone had to move out the barracks. The smell was so bad.**

That was Tomiko Takeuchi, who was born April 18, 1942 – just two weeks before Japanese Oregonians were required to report to the Assembly Center.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **Two weeks after I was born, we went straight from the hospital to the relocation camp here in Portland, where we stayed until we were put in concentration camps. So, yes. When we were interned, I was two weeks old.**

Life at the Assembly Center was challenging for everyone. It was unimaginable for a newly postpartum mother with a newborn.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **And I found out that I was allergic to milk, and so, my mom had a horrible time trying to find milk for me. And she used to spend the night in the bathroom – the large bathroom – because I'd cry all the time. And so, life for her as a brand-new mother was pretty rough.**

Accommodations were also uncomfortable for the Ouchida family. Roy describes his memories.

[Roy Ouchida] **And then they had horse bars, and that's where we stayed. We stayed in what they call the horse bars. What they did was, they built a platform. Well, first of all, they mucked up the place, but it still stunk. And they built a platform of wet wood, and then they put up plywood walls. And so, each room consisted of plywood walls, and they were really cramped. And then, there's no ceiling. So it was really interesting at night. If you coughed, everybody knew you coughed and other things.**

The lack of privacy was very difficult.

[Roy Ouchida] **One of the hardest things is, you know, Japanese women especially are very, very proper. And I know my Grammy only went to the restroom in the dark of the night, because it was a big room, and there were toilet stalls, but no doors. And so, and then the shower was one big room, and so she would do everything in the dark of the night when no one else was around.**

Through the summer months, Japanese families suffered through sweltering heat, unsanitary conditions, and boredom mixed with fear. They knew their situation was temporary, but would the next move be worse? Late in the spring of 1942, the government offered an alternative to those in the Assembly Center. Malheur County in eastern Oregon desperately needed farm labor to harvest sugar beets, a crop used heavily in the war effort. Detainees could choose to relocate to a work camp in eastern Oregon to work on sugar beet farms.

Some families experienced in farm labor decided to make the move. Kimiko Fujii Yamada explained her family's reasoning for choosing to decamp for Nyssa, Oregon.

[Jenny Yamada reading for Kimiko Fujii Yamada] **Many Gresham families signed up for the farm labor camp in the desert country of Eastern Oregon. We left for Nyssa in July 1942, as life in the crowded, hot Assembly Center became unbearable. We were moved to Eastern Oregon from Union Station in Portland by train after midnight and with the blinds closed so nobody could see us. I don't think any of us had a clue where we were going, but we had faith that it would be better than where we were. We found that the desert farm work from which we volunteered offered us a form of freedom.**

Henry Kato, a lifelong Greshamite, was personally approached by the War Relocation Authority to recruit families with farm experience. Jack Ouchida later said his family chose to move to Nyssa because of their trust in Henry Kato. Despite the modicum of freedom they enjoyed, the work camps were still under armed guard. The work was exhausting and intensive, and accommodations were rough. A hundred canvas tents on wooden platforms lined the desert under an open sky.

Kimiko Fujii remembers the reality of a desert summer.

[Jenny Yamada reading for Kimiko Fujii Yamada] **Eventually, thirty to forty families, between 300 and 500 people, came to the camp. Each tent held three to four people and had a small wood stove for cooking. No trees shaded the 100-degree summer heat.**

Families completed backbreaking farm work in extreme weather for low pay.

[Jenny Yamada reading for Kimiko Fujii Yamada] **We were hired and transported by local farmers to weed onion, thin lettuce, and harvest potatoes and sugar beets. It was difficult work in such a hot climate, and the pay was based on piecework rather than an hourly wage. We earned barely enough money to buy our food. We were confined to the tent camp by a strict curfew and guarded by the local police. We were not allowed to have cars, so we couldn't go anywhere. We were bussed into town once a week for grocery shopping and other essentials.**

In some ways, life for young people resumed a sense of normalcy**.**

[Jenny Yamada reading for Kimiko Fujii Yamada] **My brothers were bussed to Nyssa for school. Jim was on the 1944 Nyssa state championship baseball team. Both Tom and Jim were on the boxing team as well.**

But the reality of the war and their situation was never far from their consciousness.

[Jenny Yamada reading for Kimiko Fujii Yamada] **Twenty to thirty young men from the Nyssa camp were drafted into the army. Roy Namura, a neighbor from Troutdale, graduated from Nyssa High School in 1943 and was killed in northern Italy a few weeks before the war ended in 1945.**

Roy Namura was not the only young man who fought for the country that had imprisoned him and his family. Japanese Americans on the West Coast were initially denied from joining the

military, but eventually the need for more troops convinced the government to allow nissei to fight. Some were drafted, and many volunteered. More than 1,500 men from the mainland volunteered after being rejected from military service. Many of them volunteered straight from internment for the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated unit composed of Japanese-American soldiers.

They would go on to be the most decorated unit in U.S. military history, but even voluntary and heroic military service didn't dispel suspicion. As President Harry Truman later told the members of the 442nd, "You fought the enemy abroad and prejudice at home."

[Russell Yamada] **My mom's oldest brother, Kaz, was already in the army before World War II started. He was stationed down in San Antonio, so he was one of the original people that went into the 442nd. And he went through all the whole war with the 442nd in Europe – Italy, France, back to Italy again. And then later, the other boys. Ed went into the service first, and then Jack, and then Jim. But they were more at the end of the war. I think they were more involved with the occupation over in Europe and so forth.**

That was Russell Yamada, Kimiko Fujii Yamada's son. Many Japanese families, like the Fujiis, sent their sons to war from behind barbed wire.

MUSIC

Having just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary the year prior, Shintaro and Tama were not able to consider the physically taxing farm work. Instead, they spent the sweltering summer at the Portland Assembly Center with all the other Japanese Americans from Gresham, including their grown son, Robert Takaki. However, come September, all Japanese families living at the Portland Assembly Center were boarded onto trains under the cover of darkness and driven to Idaho, where they would spend the rest of their internment – and for Shintaro, Tama, and Robert, the rest of their lives. More on that next time.

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