



VOICES OF GRESHAM PODCAST

Episode 4: Relocation to Idaho

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

[Roy Ouchida] **You know, when we were incarcerated, from day one, nobody knew for how long. Okay - that was - that's a question that nobody knew. And we didn't know that there was such a thing as an assembly center. And for a while there, we thought that was - that was it. But then people start saying, well, no, this is temporary. This is an assembly center. This is not a camp. And everybody just kind of waited, not knowing when or where.**

That's Roy Ouchida. He and his family spent a sweltering summer at the Portland Assembly Center. Last episode, we heard from Roy and others about the indignities Japanese families experienced while held in barely modified livestock holdings: the smell, the lack of privacy, the constant presence of armed guards. But as Roy explained, one of the worst parts of the summer of 1942 was the uncertainty of what the future held. Some families, like the Fujii,

chose to leave the assembly center when the chance was offered and instead spent the internment years sugar beet farming in Eastern Oregon.

But today, we'll learn what happened to those who did not relocate to Nyssa. Those who remained included 67-year-old Tama and 75-year-old Shintaro Takaki, though it did not include Miyo Iwakoshi, as she had died eleven years prior to internment. Those leaving the assembly center were given very little information about what came next.

[Roy Ouchida] **Well, we were just told, you pack up, and you're gonna leave - you're gonna hop the train on a particular day. And that's it. You just had to get up there and line up and get on the train, so...**

The train was headed for Idaho, though the Japanese families didn't know that. They also didn't know that while they had spent the summer in Portland at the Assembly Center, construction had been underway on the Minidoka War Relocation Center near Hunt, Idaho, in the High Desert and far from the West Coast.

[Roy Ouchida] **Okay, it was a hot August day. We got on the train. All the blinds were drawn so we wouldn't know where we're going. There was one soldier per car. So we chugged it up the Columbia River. As we got a few miles out, it really got hot. And, in fact, that August was one of the hottest recorded Augusts for Oregon.**

Eventually, they made it to Minidoka, one of the ten camps that were used to house the Japanese Americans living on the West Coast during the war. Nearly 10,000 people of Japanese ancestry would eventually arrive at Minidoka. Residents lived in barracks, clustered together in groups. In an oral history interview with the Densho Oral History Project, Lily Kajiwara described arriving at Minidoka.

[Lily Kajiwara] **I do remember finally arriving and seeing the barracks. I thought it was bleak, there was no trees, that it was desolate looking. But, my goodness, where are we?**

No trees meant no shade - no protection from the desert sun. The incessant heat was not the last of the bleak realities that met the new arrivals.

[Roy Ouchida] **I remember when we first got there, it was May 7th. Our father signed in the logbook. And that's when an earth-shaking thing came to be. That is, we lost our name. Our name was 15477. Father was 15477A. My mom was, again, B. My oldest brother was C. My sister was D. My other brother was E. And then Roy was F, and my kid brother was G. So, that was - that's our official name from May 7th, 1942. And you know, as far as I know, that's still my official name. No one's ever told me, from Washington, D.C., never, you know - from the archives or whomever - no one's ever told me that my name was ever changed back.**

Though the residents of Minidoka didn't have to work like those who had moved to Nyssa, their movements were still limited, and guard towers and barbed wire fences reminded them daily that they were not free. The residents, however, did whatever they could to make the situation as bearable as possible. Tomiko Takeuchi explains.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **There was so much freedom. No one was working or anything. And so, there was a lot of time, and so they would get together and do things. I know that the women had a lot of things. They did crocheting and things like this. And the men, they had baseball leagues and this kind of stuff. And they had activities, dance band. And so, it was like being in a retirement center because they had very little that had to be done. So they had a newspaper - *The Irrigation [Irrigator]* - that was there. And then they had a choir group. And then, because the food was so horrendous, they started irrigating and growing vegetables so we could have fresh vegetables.**

Most residents were used to traditional Japanese cuisine, and so, the food served in the cafeterias was unfamiliar and unpalatable.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **We called it Standard American Diet - SAD. And it was sad - lots of grease and a lot of, well, stuff we just didn't eat. Eventually then of course, the Japanese people got more involved in the cooking and the planning and stuff, and I think it became a much easier place to live.**

Residents eventually grew victory gardens, raising vegetables that were fresh and familiar. Ken Kinoshita's parents, Ami and Kaz, were interned at Minidoka and were used to growing crops. Like many Gresham internees, the Kinoshitas were farmers.

[Ken Kinoshita] **And my dad farmed at the camp, and they produced enough produce to sell but also to feed the folks at the camp. So they were self-sustainable.**

Tomiko Takeuchi's dad was not used to sitting around. In Portland, he had worked hard as a small business owner.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **My father got very involved from day one. He was always an organizer and a community leader and got very involved. And they put together baseball teams and all of this type of thing. So they stayed very active.**

Tomiko's father Tommy eventually took on an incredible task - documenting the experience at Minidoka. He became editor of a publication called the Minidoka Interlude, a book in the format of a high school yearbook. Incredibly, the book included a picture of each of the 44 blocks with all of its members posed together.

There are over 9,000 people pictured and their names printed underneath. Minidoka was the only camp to have anything of the kind. It remains a bittersweet witness to an experience that

isn't easily summed up. Gwenda McCall and Ray Shiiki flipped through a copy of the Minidoka Interlude on local talk show *I Remember When* in the 1980s.

[Gwenda McCall] **This is a marvelous album called the Minidoka Interlude. And the statistics and the information is so accurate in here. I mean... I'd like to flip through and just show some pictures of the people - it looks like an annual - standing outside the barracks - a barracks - and these are people of these blocks. And just to give our audience an idea of the immensity of this Minidoka Relocation Center. So this is a block. There are 44 of these - families after families - 44 pages of these. The size is just overwhelming to me. You had a whole city with your own high and grade schools and hospital.**

[Ray Shiiki interjects] **Right, all the schools and hospital, and everything was located right in that one camp.** [McCall] **Umm... In this one section, it's called the "Divisions." That means like the jobs that people had?** [Shiiki] **Oh yes, uh-huh.** [McCall] **And I'd like to just flip through here and give people an idea of some of the jobs. Umm, there's the coal crew, the post office, the telephone operators, hospital, the nursery school... And then, they have a list of activities. Now, you were in high school when you were there.** [Shiiki] **Right.**

[McCall] **And you attended a high school that had about 200 people in the senior class, of which, you were the president of the senior class. So let's see Ray when he was president of the senior class - right here.** [Shiiki] **Ha, I got a little hair then, didn't I?** [McCall] **Yeah! It's quite a hairdo. And since it was a high school, you did regular high school things like had the Sweetheart's Ball.** [Shiiki] **Right.**

Despite the concerted effort to make the best of their circumstances, the residents could not avoid the difficult realities of life in the camp.

[Ken Kinoshita] **But it was like army barracks, and it was... So - like - I'm not sure if there was any type of like insulation, and it was windy and dusty. And, I guess my mom had talked about it because it was so dusty that she was constantly doing laundry - because everything would, you know, get dusty and dirty, so...**

Ray Shiiki described his family's lodgings to Gwenda McCall.

[Gwenda McCall] **Now, we have some pictures of the barracks that you - your families - lived in. Can you tell us a little bit about the barracks?** [Ray Shiiki] **Well, this is a typical barrack, and they called a group of these barracks a block. Within one barrack, there would be rooms partitioned off for smaller couples - maybe a smaller family or two people - and some had, say, a bigger room for five, six people or whatever. But there again, we're all in one room. The whole family is in one room.** [McCall] **This is just tar paper. It must have been cold.**

[Shiiki] **Cold is right. It was really cold. While it was heated - they had a little pot-bellied stove, I guess you'd call them. And they'd burned coal. And you had to keep it burning all night to stay warm, but it was very, very cold in the wintertime. Wintertime, too, a lot of time, if there was no snow cover, the dust would blow so bad that you couldn't even see these barracks. You'd be right up next to them, and you couldn't even see the barracks.**

[McCall interjects] **Really?** [Shiiki] **It was just dusty. And...** [McCall] **And here it looks like a mud hole.** [Shiiki] **Mud hole - that's probably after a rain or the snow thawed out or something.** [McCall] **Hmm.**

In some ways, life moved on with normalcy in camp. Babies were born, including Ken Kinoshita's sisters, Cheryl and Jane, and children went to school.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **They right away, when we got there, they got the different residents - our cousins and stuff - who had graduated from high school. And they actually taught the schools at the beginning. And so that there wasn't, you know - there wasn't classrooms - but they right away made sure that the kids were getting an education. And so, my - I remember my one cousin, Lily Kajiwara - she had just graduated from high school and so, they had her teach. You remember how terrible it was because these kids were unruly.**

Lily Kajiwara described her teaching experience in her oral history for Densho.

[Lily Kajiwara] **I don't know how I was chosen. I think I was chosen because I did not apply or volunteer. But I somehow was told to report to the school system and assigned to a teacher to help the teacher. And umm... I never intended to be a teacher, and it was not a profession that I was interested in, but when they tell you that you're report to work there, you do. So I did report to work there, and I was assigned to a classroom. But the thing is that, the first year, in the middle of the term, the teacher resigned. And so - the school - they had no way of hiring another person, I guess. So they assigned two of us to take over the class for the rest of the year. I had absolutely no training. I think the most important thing was to keep order in the class.**

Lily was barely an adult herself, just nineteen and twenty when she was teaching at camp. She was more interested in socializing and making friends.

[Lily Kajiwara] **I learned to dance because, you know, the dances were important. You know, we, uh... There was a lot of free time. We didn't have to cook. We didn't have to, you know, clean house because there was one room. So there was lots of free time. And so, you know, I was nineteen, twenty. And umm... So the big thing was to socialize with your group, and the other thing was to learn to dance, because, you know. And so, every weekend, we'd look forward to it. Every block had their dances. So it was really**

pleasurable. I love to dance, and we learned, you know, many of the steps. And so, that was our social life.

For young people like Lily, being interned was the first time she had been in contact with so many other Japanese Americans.

[Lily Kajiwara] **It was a complete eye-opener for me. Living in Corbett - where there's only our small community of Japanese friends - and then, all of a sudden, you go into a place where there's thousands of similar Japanese my own age. And it was a complete eye-opener, and it was nice - to be able to have friends of the same background and same, you know, interests. And so, yeah. That part was uh... great.**

It can be hard to find out details about life in camps because those residents who were adults have mostly passed away. And those old enough to remember the experience were often reluctant to talk about it. Despite the indignities they faced, the difficulties they were required to bear, many issei, or first-generation Japanese, bore the weight silently. Roy Ouchida felt intense frustration and eventually anger, but he never heard the same from his parents.

[Roy Ouchida] **And I never heard - I never heard - my parents complain. I never heard them complain at all, at camp or after camp. The only complaint I ever heard was from my mom. And that was - she was trying to make something - and she was cutting cloth with her shortened pinking shears, and she was upset about that. That's the only thing I remember about her ever saying anything.**

Whether or not they felt anger or resentment, culturally and generationally, those feelings weren't often expressed.

[Roy Ouchida] **There's an old Japanese philosophy - what is the term? *Shikita ga nai*, which means "can't be helped." In other words, you can't fight it, and there's nothing you can do about it. Let it... Let it pass.**

The children of other issei and nisei residents had similar experiences. Ken Kinoshita was not born until after his parents returned from camp and so didn't know about his parents' experiences until much later.

[Ken Kinoshita] **It was only when some books were published about their experience in the camps when I read it, and I would, you know, read it, and I'd talk to them about it. That would be the only time that they would talk about it. And even then, it was somewhat of a limited conversation. My general reaction to all that is that it - to me - it just seems like that's something they just, you know, wanted to put in the past and not really necessarily talk about it or... [Stephanie Vallance interjects] **Relive it.** [Kinoshita] **Relive it, yes.****

Growing up, Tomiko Takeuchi also never heard about her parents' incarceration experience.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **Through all my high school, college, there was never any information on the internment or any of that. So when we had our meeting with the whole family, and my dad talked about it, it was a surprise - because you never heard of any - none of that ever was taught at school.**

When Tomiko's parents finally told their children what they went through, they did not want their kids to feel resentful of white America. Eventually though, the younger generations began to see internment through a more critical lens.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **Because, man, my folks went through it without a - and, as they say - *gaman*¹ - You close your mouth, you do it, and you just go ahead. It's pretty impressive, and I think *sansei* - the second generation - like me, we did. We were very successful. We all went to - not all. A lot of us went through college. We became leaders in different ways. The *yonse* - the third generation - is the one that pushed for the redress, and they speak out in a different way than we did. We just made life better for us and kept plugging along. But they stirred up the pot and said, you know, this isn't okay, and we need to have classes and to have people know about what happened.**

Eventually, the narrative around internment would shift. It would take decades, though, for formal recognition of the injustice of Japanese internment - for descriptions like state-sponsored racism and generational trauma to become part of the dominant narrative around internment. First, residents had to return home, build new lives, and navigate the continuing suspicion and prejudice that awaited them upon their return.

Many, like Tama and Shintaro, chose to remain in Idaho rather than return to the home that had been taken from them. To end, I want to recognize that the reluctance of the older issei and nisei to discuss their experience does not indicate a passive acceptance of suffering. Rather, it showed a focused determination to endure incredible loss and pain, but to do so while maintaining dignity, conflicting cultural identities, and the bonds of family life. Tomiko Takeuchi shares her reflection.

[Tomiko Takeuchi] **A lot of the people that were in camp didn't speak very good English. A lot didn't have an education. A lot hadn't interacted with the community. And so, it was just - and they were, they're just, when you think about it, they're just - it was really amazing. So without - there was never any kind of sabotage or problems. So when you think of a hundred, you know - what was 180,000 people, who the majority were American citizens - were taken, lifted, and everything taken from them. For them to stand with their head held high really makes me proud.**

MUSIC

¹ *Gaman* in Japanese is the concept of patience and dignity in the face of seemingly unbearable circumstances.

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