



## VOICES OF GRESHAM PODCAST

### Episode 5: Coming Home: Life After Internment

*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 Valance, public historian at the Gresham Historical Society.

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[Roy Ouchida] **Come May of '45, they gave us a great big box to pack our stuff. And then we had our - they told us, we'll give you a train ticket to anywhere you wanna go. And so - we didn't go very far.**

After three years of forced internment, Roy Ouchida and his family were finally able to leave. Roy's family had been interned during World War II at the Minidoka War Relocation Center, essentially a concentration camp in the Idaho desert. The Ouchidas were among the 120,000 Japanese Americans forcibly removed from their homes after the bombing of Pearl Harbor fostered intense anti-Japanese sentiment.

Last episode, we looked into life inside the camps, but today we're looking at life on the other side of internment: coming home. For three long years, families endured often dehumanizing conditions, until 1945, when the incarceration of Japanese Americans was deemed unconstitutional, and the U.S. government began gradually allowing those interned to leave.

But where would they go, and how would they get there? Like the Ouchidas, most had no savings and had given up their property, their homes, and their businesses with no compensation.

We'll hear stories today about what waited in Gresham for those who decided to make the long journey to the place they considered home. As Roy describes, coming home wasn't always a direct line.

[Roy Ouchida] **We went to Vale, Oregon, which is only - I don't know - three, four hundred miles. And the reason we went to Vale, Oregon is because my cousin, he was growing sugar beets and dry onion. And so we moved there for about seven months. And everybody but me and my youngest brother worked the farm, weeding the sugar beets and the onions. And then I did work a little bit. They forced me to pick up the onions and top them - cut the tops.**

**January, my brother - my oldest brother - my dad, went to Portland by train, and then they luckily restarted our 1930 Dodge Brothers truck that was stored by our neighbor, the Nybergs. He had it stored in the barn, and it packed up, and we moved to someplace My father knew a family that lived between Boring and Sandy. Ever since we left camp, we were basically migrant workers. I mean, we lived on other people's facilities and we just - all we did was farm work, so...**

Like many other Japanese American families, the Ouchidas had been farmers before the war but didn't own their land.

[Roy Ouchida] **I want to emphasize that the farm we had was rented. We did not own it. According to the Oregon law, pushed by the KKK, Orientals could not buy land. They could not lease land. They could not sharecrop. They could only rent land by the month.**

When the Ouchidas left Minidoka, they had no home to return to or farm to run, instead working as laborers on other people's farms to make ends meet. Eventually, Roy's dad was able to find a farm where they could put down roots.

[Roy Ouchida] **My dad met his old buddy, Mr. Rudolph Berg - a good old German. We moved into his little work buildings as migrant workers. One year we picked berries for him, and then we stayed there for - he let us stay there for the winter. And then the next spring, we cut a deal where we would sharecrop the berry farm. So we had one year of sharecropping. Rudolph says, well, do we want to buy the farm? Well, since all the money was pooled in one spot, we did have the money for down payment for that farm. And so we got into the down payment - we got into a five-year contract. So that was our home for the whole family, and for the first time we had a bathroom in the same building. It was, you know, a flush toilet of all things, you know.**

By the time Roy and his family settled into the house with a flush toilet, it had been six years since their relocation – six years since they had been forced to leave their home in Pleasant Valley.

[Roy Ouchida] **And you know, the two houses are only about a mile apart. From the top of the hill on McKinley Road down McKinley, across Giese Road to Pleasant Valley Avenue. Drive a block to Butler Road, and then one block from south of the Butler Road is our house and the twenty acres.**

Much had changed in Gresham since the executive order that prompted relocation. Headlines pulled from *The Gresham Outlook* at the time demonstrate the anti-Japanese hysteria surrounding their return to Gresham. Mass meetings were held to discuss the issue. "How Will We Rid the Coast of the Japs?" was the title of a meeting held at Gresham High on Tuesday, March 13th, 1945.

Another told of a protest session on February 9th. *Quote*: "The purpose of the meeting will be to plan protest action against the return of persons of Japanese ancestry to West Coast areas while the war with Japan is still in progress."

An organization formed in Gresham called Oregon Anti-Japanese Incorporated, and they sponsored many of these meetings. The group was formed by *quote*: "Eastern Multnomah County residents representing business and agricultural interests." And they hoped to pass legislation prohibiting Japanese from relocating to Oregon. But they weren't the only ones who opposed the resettlement of their former neighbors.

In *The People's Forum*, a column published in *The Outlook*, others expressed their opinion on whether Japanese Americans should be permitted to return to coastal areas. A sailor stationed abroad sent his thoughts in writing to be published in *The Outlook*:

[Recited by Adam Lyons] **"Dear people of Gresham, I thought I might add a little item to your paper as I read *The Outlook*, which I receive regularly overseas from my family. I find they are talking about letting the Japanese people come back. If you want a true American sailor's opinion - and I have talked to a number of boys who have said the same - it's very hard to believe they would think about letting these people return until the war is won. It's not fair to us fellows. We are still fighting this war and expect to for some time yet. Have we let you down? You bet we haven't. We are still fighting, and we will keep fighting until victory is entirely won. Please don't let us down now. Letting them wander about free now means endangering the cause we are fighting for."**

Another wrote in purporting that *quote*: "We cannot live in the same neighborhood with the Japanese without embarrassment of both races. American-born Japanese hold a dual citizenship in America and Japan and cannot consistently become good American citizens.

The Oregon Anti-Japanese Incorporated eventually morphed into the Japanese Exclusion League. Many local residents joined their ranks, including the sitting mayor at the time, Dr. H. H. Hughes. Hughes was an otherwise well-respected local doctor. His legacy, however, has been tarnished by his involvement with the league.

In 2006, the Gresham City Council prevented a statue in his honor from being erected in Main City Park due to his involvement with the league and evidence of discrimination in his medical practice.

Not everyone was opposed to the resettlement of Gresham's Japanese American families. In a powerful rebuke of those joining the Exclusion League, a resident of Fairview, Helen Rees, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Gresham Outlook* in protest of their protest. Helen has since passed away, but her daughter, Ann Rosene of Gresham, describes her mother's reaction to the anti-Japanese prejudice playing out in the pages of *The Gresham Outlook*.

[Ann Rosene] **Well, Fairview is quite near an area in Troutdale where there were a lot of vegetable farming, and a lot of the Japanese were working there. And so she was friends with some of the Japanese. She was very aware of what was happening to them. And a lot of people were. She cared enough that she wrote the letter to *The Gresham Outlook* about how the Japanese were being treated.**

On December 5th, 1944, *The Outlook* published Helen's letter to the editor. Her daughter Ann agreed to read her mother's letter for the podcast.

[Ann Rosene] **Editor *Outlook*, I would like to express a personal opinion on the subject of opposition, organized or otherwise, to the return to the Pacific Coast of Japanese American citizens. This move is surely against our very constitutional rights. It cannot be called a Christian attitude, nor an American one either. I doubt if any man in service would condone such an attitude. Freedom is what they're fighting for. Should we harbor organized resistance to the rights of American citizens? Shame to the man whose name appears on such a document. Helen Rees.**

Helen was not the only Gresham resident who called out the un-American nature of the Anti-Japanese League. Captain Billy Edward Lauterbach wrote his thoughts in a letter to *The Outlook* while stationed overseas.

[Recited by Ryan Vallance] **To *The Outlook*, what are we fighting for? Among other things, to save minorities from persecution. The article "Races" in the December 25th issue of *Time* magazine showed that many people in the United States are not aware of this fundamental principle of liberty. Indeed, they are attempting to destroy the very thing that we are fighting to save: the right of men to live and work together in freedom and in peace.**

**Such things as obliterating soldiers' names on a serviceman's roll of honor simply because they are of Japanese descent, or conducting an anti-Japanese mass meeting, or placing signs in a shop window to keep out Japanese trade - these things cause me to bow my head in shame for the liberty-loving American people.**

**Perhaps the people at home should be educated on why we fight. I am not an outsider in this problem, for I was born and raised in a community in Oregon where there was a large percentage of Japanese people. I went to school with their sons and daughters, and I am going back to my home in that same community after the war. Men are dying out here to preserve a cherished way of life while their people at home are destroying it. It does not follow that because a man is not white, he is not good. What has happened to the additional American ideal of fair play?**

Those who stood up for the rights of their former neighbors were not enough to stem the tide of prejudice that waited for the returning Japanese-American families. Ed Fujii describes the reception his family received on their return to Gresham.

[Ed Fujii] **Very hostile, very. They didn't want us back here. It was very hostile. They tried to put us to a point where we were not able to get the supplies to farm.**

Like the Fujiis, many Japanese families had been farmers prior to the war. The antagonism caused many families to give up what they knew. Lily Kajiwara explained what happened when her family returned.

[Lily Kajiwara] **My parents owned a home in Troutdale - a home and more than twenty acres of land. But when my dad went back to see about the house and the land, one of the neighbors came out and told him that he didn't want to have them come back. So when the dad and my brother discussed it and they decided that, well - and my brothers really didn't want to be farmers. They were all into academic life. So they wouldn't have been able to help my dad. So I guess - but anyhow, they - because of this man saying they didn't want him back and the condition of the house and - he had nothing. So, decided to just sell it. And so, they sold it to all the neighbors.**

Those who stayed faced other difficulties as well. Signs in store windows declared bans on Japanese shoppers. Equipment became more difficult to obtain.

[Carl Kato] **That Bill Hessel, who had the John Deere dealership, would not sell any John Deere equipment to any Japanese. So for a long time, you know, there was - Ted Mullins had the International Harvester and so the Farmall, Ford tractors, Allis-Chalmers, the - those were the brands that the Japanese had. Not until way later did any of them get John Deere equipment.**

Others felt more direct forms of hostility. Ed Fujii had heard of the unfriendly atmosphere and worried about his brother starting high school.

[Ed Fujii] **Well, I had the task to take my brother Tom back to Gresham High School, 1945. Didn't know how the things were gonna go, but had to take him to the principal's office, and he seen me, so he, you know - he was a very friendly person. And he knew we returned. The order was that we return. So, and he told me, "Hey, do you know how the conditions are?" And I told him, well, I'm very much aware of it. I told him, it's not too friendly, but I understand, I told him. Well, he was very supportive and made an announcement over the PA system that - to all the students that we have students of Japanese ancestry returning to school because the order now is listed that they can return. So he handled it well, and my brother Tom had no problem.**

Despite the principal's announcement, not all high schoolers were accepted back without animosity. Roy Ouchida explains.

[Roy Ouchida] **In fact, I remember during my shaving age when I'm shaving in the morning, what comes to mind is, all right now, who's gonna be the one to pick on me or insult me or do something? So that was really my mindset every freaking morning when I went to school. What - whose little gang of two or three is gonna pick on me? And then it's always - in a situation like Gresham High School, which is big enough to have several individual little cliques, you know, there's always a little gang. There's always a gang of three or a gang of four, you know, and there's always one gang leader, and then they got these three chicken followers, you know. They always - well, they always wanna start a fight, you know. I never did. I just, basically, I just ignored them, and then that got me by. But I had to take a lot of yapping and a lot of brutal onslaught.**

Roy has had a lot of time to think about that brutality and the ferocity with which it came.

[Roy Ouchida] **I think, though, a lot of it was caused by the fact that there were three years of propaganda, you know, against the Germans and the Japanese. So that's got to wear on you, especially if you're young, to hear this propaganda for three years. How could you not believe that or go with it at least, you know?**

Returning home was far from the same for everyone, however. Many Greshamites welcomed their neighbors back with open arms. Carol Andrews describes the joy she felt at seeing her neighbors, the Shiikis, return.

[Carol Andrews] **I was out in the yard doing something - chasing an animal, I imagine - and this blue car came driving in, a light powder blue car that I'd never seen before because we didn't have much company or, you know - I mean, there weren't many cars around, there wasn't, you know. And this young Japanese jumped out, and he said, "Hi Carol, well how are you doing," or something, and I said, okay, and he said, "Where's the folks," and I said in the house. And at that time, it dawned on me it was Ray Shiiki, and so I went flying in the house then too. And he said, we're, you know, we're back.**

Many former residents lost their farms. For a lucky few, though, kind neighbors cared for their property in their absence. Ken Kinoshita explains what happened to his family's farm.

[Ken Kinoshita] **Yeah, I don't remember the fellow's name, but fortunately one of their neighbors actually volunteered to take care of the farm for them, so it was fair for them, and they came back. And I know that that wasn't always the situation for some of the folks that I know that - they - my father, I know he felt very fortunate that they were able to have this person take care of their farm for them.**

Ken is right. It wasn't a very common situation. Yet the Fujii family has a similar story. Bukichi Fujii's grandson, Russell Yamada, explains.

[Russell Yamada] **Now prior to the war, they had owned the property. So they could come back. And the reason they had something to come back to was because they had a neighbor - the family Andrew and Charlotte Cunningham. And Mrs. Cunningham actually worked on my grandfather's farm. And they actually moved into their house. Scott Cunningham, he would have been the son of the couple. He had something that he had written down where he remembers a night that my grandfather, Mr. Fujii, came over to their house and asked them if they would look after the farm.**

**And his parents agreed, and he said that, he said Mr. Fujii was a very formidable figure. He was over 200 pounds and very stocky and a man that you would never imagine seeing tears ever coming from. But he said that he saw tears on Mr. Fujii's face after his parents agreed, because it was very emotional that they - you know - they had something that they could watch after that, and they actually had something to come back to. A lot of Japanese families didn't have that, and so, in that sense, they were extremely fortunate to have that.**

Clearly there was no singular experience that defined the return of Japanese Americans to Gresham. Rarely is any time period so uncomplicated. Though the prevailing sentiment in the larger community was hostile to Japanese American families returning from Minidoka, there were clearly instances where individual relationships were valued above suspicion and prejudice. Gwenda McCall retells the story of when the Fujiis returned to town.

[Gwenda McCall] **Jim Fujii said on their first day back in town, he and his dad saw Larry Aylsworth standing with a bunch of men on Main Street across from Miller Kidder Hardware, where the Thai Orchid restaurant is now. He said, "They all stared at us. Then Larry walked away from them, came across the street, and put his arms around my dad and shook his hand. He did it in front of God and everybody. I've never forgotten that."**

Some brave neighbors, like Larry Aylsworth, were willing to stand against the tide. Some returning Japanese Americans were welcomed with open arms by neighbors who had kept watch for three years. More often, they were met with silence, suspicion, and open forms of discrimination.

They had endured so much during the internment years and had even created beauty in the midst of fear and intolerance. While behind barbed wire, the Japanese internees had built lush gardens in the middle of an arid desert, as well as a community in the midst of suffering. When they were finally able to return home to Gresham, they had to pick up the pieces and move forward, again rebuilding in hostile lands.

Some, like Miyo's daughter Tama and Shintaro, and their son, Robert, chose not to return and instead stayed in Idaho for the remainder of their lives. Next week, we will return to Miyo's legacy as we close out the series on the Japanese American experience in Gresham and learn the truth about Mio's final resting place.

We will also hear about the incredible rebuilding that took place among those Japanese American families who chose to return to Gresham. While there most certainly would have been anger and sadness over the years, possessions and opportunities lost, many chose not to think about it. Immediately following the war, many Japanese wanted to leave behind the trauma and focus on moving forward. Carl Kato explains why.

[Carl Kato] **There's a saying in Japanese that says, "*shikata ga nai*," which is, "it can't be helped, it's happening." So if it's something that's good, you want to remember it, you want to talk about it. If it's something that's not so good, it's happening, but let it go.**

Eventually, though, the following generations demanded a reckoning and insisted on formal recognition of what was lost - next time on Voices of Gresham.

Voices of Gresham is a production of the Gresham Historical Society, supported by a grant from the Oregon Heritage Commission. I'm your host, Stephanie Vallance, and I wrote and produced this episode. Editing and research support was provided by Melissa Beveny. The oral history interviews with Lily Kajiwara and Ed Fujii and many others, can be found at [Densho.org](http://Densho.org). The Densho Digital Repository is a multi-partner initiative of Densho, the Japanese American Legacy Project, and contains oral history interviews, photographs, documents, and other materials relating to the Japanese American experience. Additional information on the project is available at [www.densho.org](http://www.densho.org).

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