FREEDOM LOST
The experiences of OSU students of Japanese ancestry during World War II
FREEDOM LOST

When it came time to take individual player photos of the OSC football team that fall of 1941, Jack Yoshihara decided on leaping in the air for an acrobatic catch of the ball.

You still can see it today in the Beaver yearbook, right there along with photos of his teammates and action shots from a season that may be the most storied in the history of Oregon State sports.

These were the players and this was the team that played in the ’42 Rose Bowl, upsetting mighty Duke University on its own home field in Durham, North Carolina; a game often referred to as the “displaced” Rose Bowl because it remains the only one ever held outside Pasadena, Calif. It was moved because of the national security concerns raised by the Dec. 7 attack on Pearl Harbor, a day when two countries crashed headlong into a war that would change the world forever and would shatter, at least for a time, the hopes and dreams of 42 OSC students of Japanese ancestry.

For Jack Yoshihara, No. 86, Dec. 7 was the day his dream of playing football in the Rose Bowl died.

STORY BY REBECCA LANDIS
World War II caused many students to leave Oregon State College. But there was a small group of students, who because of their of Japanese ancestry, left under military order, not as refugees but to be interned with their parents behind barbed wire.

Although most students subject to the West Coast exclusion orders of 1942 were Californians, OSC had more students of Japanese ancestry in 1941 than any other Oregon college. Of the 42 students of Japanese ancestry enrolled, only two had been born in Japan, and one of these reportedly did not learn of her status until she was 18. The American-born students, called Nisei, ultimately were excluded from the West Coast, along with the immigrant generation, known as the Issei, who were denied U.S. citizenship until 1952.

The decision to evacuate 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast was not made immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack. Authorities quickly rounded up "suspected" enemy aliens and evacuated sensitive areas. It was not until Feb. 19 that the president issued an executive order allowing the military to designate areas "from which any and all persons may be excluded."

The University of California, which enrolled the largest number of students subject to evacuation, took the lead in national efforts to ensure continued education for these students. But Oregon State administrators supported the efforts and also sought to help students cope with the red tape that constrained their final months in Corvallis. Although West Coast educators made no serious effort to contest the students' evacuation, educators at OSC and across the nation worked to get the students into schools outside the exclusion zone.

The Nisei students stuck in Portland left the campus and the internment centers. Many of them began a series of detours, those contracted to have found different doors to a successful life.

Although their parents generally stayed behind in the camps, most of the former OSC students scattered to Midwestern and Eastern cities to resume their studies or to work. Some eventually joined or were drafted by the military, which had rejected them not long before, and a few among the surge of students using GI Bill benefits after the war. Others did not return to college. A few evacuees came back to OSC after the war, sometimes alongside younger siblings, sharing their parents' faith in the worth of higher education, a number have sent their children and grandchildren to OSU.

Back to school, return to the West Coast

Fifty years ago, Aya Iwasaki (Puiju), 48, arrived on the OSC campus two months ahead of her parents' return from government-imposed exile in Eastern Oregon, where her family was-sharecropping in a designated "Fence zone." Aya, whose sister Kate Iwasaki attended OSC at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, said she felt "petrified" to be returning to the Willamette Valley on her own. "I was gypsy, looking back on it," said Fuji, adding that she soon felt at home when she saw former classmates from Hillsboro. Now living in Gresham, Fuji is a retired hospital nutritionist.

Unlike most other families subject to evacuation, the Iwasakis did not live in an internment camp. Instead, they volunteered to help harvest beets and onions in a farm labor camp near the farm of a hashiguchi family that had produced two sons, Roy and Ray, from OSC just as evacuation began.

Although the few Japanese-American servicemen receiving military training preceded Aya Iwasaki's arrival, she was among the first half-dozen or so non-military Japanese-American students to enroll at OSC at war's end. In the next two years, five of the 42 students whose studies at OSC had been disrupted by the evacuation began to trickle back. Returning were Shigeru Hong, 88; Masao Kinoshita, 49; Robert Masao Yoshimoto, 56; Tom Tomomi Namba; and Tsukasa Mitani Sakuma.

Three members of a Hood River family whose history is intertwined with OSC, the evacuation and military service of the students, who are now so ready to fight the Japanese empire, among these American students of Japanese ancestry. Noting that some American-born students of Japanese ancestry already had left school feeling that other students would not accept them, the editorial said other students recognized the students' allegiance to America and wished they would stay.

Days after the attack, Japanese-American students signed a letter to firing president Dr. F.A. Gillifill, expressing "our unserving loyalty to our country, the United States of America, and to all her institutions."

Dr. Gillifill responded with praise and thanks for the students' declaration of loyalty. Florence Yogi (Fugan) a Hawaiian home economics junior, was one of the students who felt the need to leave OSC reported feeling stunned and a bit uncomfortable. Masao Kinoshita said he was assured by applause for the loyalty letter at a conversation. "I don't think the people in my dorm changed at all," said Kay Kiyokawa. "They still talked to me."

Robert Yoshimoto said his "fellow students knew how I felt and treated me pretty good."

Three students were evicted from a private boarding house because of their ancestry. Frank Saito, said he ended up sleeping on a church basement floor. Taro Miura, now a retired Portland machinist, who was evicted from the same boarding house, recalls finding a place in another boarding house, after college officials tried and failed to persuade the owners to reverse their decision.

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Sports

Most former students interviewed said travel restrictions had little effect on their daily lives, and only one student reported having to drop a class. But student athletes felt the restrictions every time their teams went on the road.

Because coaches were unable to overcome travel restrictions, Yoshihara did not travel to play Duke in North Carolina. Travel restrictions also kept Yoshihara from wrestling for Oregon State.

Although no newspaper discussed his absence from the big game, the Oregonian noted his presence at the Assembly Center. The College Nisit, by University of Washington professor Robert W. O'Brien, erroneously identifies "Roy Yamaguchi" as the USC Rose Bowl championship team member.

Yoshihara, whose Rose Bowl jacket is part of a traveling Japanese American National Museum exhibit on Japanese pioneers of Oregon, is retired from directing refrigeration for Fred Meyer stores.

Ed Yada, who recalls pitching in the gym with Glenn Elliot (later a big league), also got a scoring hit in the big game, according to the Barometer.

Kay Kiyokawa, whose short stature and pitching performance attracted words of townspeople in his freshman year, was offered a "last chance" shot at Ushu in a home game, but that game was washed out. Kiyokawa, who remembers coach Ralph Coleman as a "fair man," later played for the University of Connecticut in college, baseball and football. One other returning player, Carl Somekawa, was listed in the lineup against Linfield.

Barometer sports page references to the Japanese-American members of the baseball team and their Linfield story on March 28, 1942. Although four Japanese-American members of the baseball team are shown in the 1942 Beaver, the three who went out for varsity are not pictured or listed in the 1943 Beaver.

And then there were 14

A total of 42 students of Japanese ancestry attended OSC in the 1941-42 school year. At least six students of Japanese ancestry did not return for the winter term, based on comparison of fall and winter term lists.

But four others who had not been enrolled for fall were enrolled in winter term.

By May 2, when Registrar E.B. Lemon answered an inquiry from a representative of the Japanese American Citizens League, 22 students of Japanese ancestry were registered at OSC. The Corvallis Gazette-Times reported that only 14 students were registered on May 27 at the American Legion Hall, which served as the Corvallis "reception center." No one else registered in Corvallis, since there were no persons of Japanese ancestry on the faculty and the 1940 census showed none in Benton County.

Departure

Many of the students who went home that spring to help families close down farms and businesses and pack family belongings for the evacuation. Most Oregon families went to the Portland Assembly Center, but families from Hood River, Wasco and parts of Sherman counties were sent to Pinedale Assembly Center in the California desert near Fresno.

Conflicting newspaper accounts during the last few weeks of school may have added to the uncertainty. The Gazette-Times reported on May 21 that the students would have to leave by May 22 if they desire to join their families in evacuation. The Barometer of May 26 reported that although remaining students were required to register on May 27, the evacuation itself would take place June 1 to June 3. The paper observed that "Oregon State students affected by the new order may, by fast work, finish the term." The Oregonian reported May 28 that registrants at Corvallis, Eugene, Salem and Medford were to be sent directly to the Tule Lake relocation center beginning June 1, while the Gazette-Times speculated on May 29 that they would go to Portland.

Yoshinomi said a sergeant at the bus station tried to talk him into leaving directly for Tule Lake from Corvallis, but he decided to stick with his family. Had Yoshinomi not declined, he would have been separated from his family, which ultimately went to Minidoka. Yoshinomi recalls that on his birthday, May 29, he and a few other OSC students boarded a bus to a join a handful of U of O students en route to Portland.

Saito, unable to join his family in Hawaii, did not go to the assembly center. He recalls taking a bus from Corvallis to meet a train in Albany carrying Japanese families heading to Tule Lake. He sat down next to a woman who offered him a drumstick from the last chicken she had killed and cooked.

"Tears came, and I couldn't eat that drumstick," Saito said.

Five of seven Japanese American seniors (Tom Araki, Roy and Ray Hashitani, Harry Iwataki and Tony Takashima) managed to graduate in 1942 despite the impending evacuation. The Stater could not determine whether any were able to attend commencement, which took place May 30.

Portland Assembly Center

Most Oregon families were sent to the former Pacific Lumber Company's Tule Lake Exposition Center in Portland to live for a few months in structures minimally converted for human habitation. Yoshinomi remembers the makeshift cabins fashioned out of two-by-fours, plywood and shingles, complete with knotholes. "You could see your neighbor," he said. "There was no ceiling so you could hear your neighbor snoring or laughing."

Yoshinomi, who transferred as a junior in 1939 from OSC to the U of O Medical School, was enlisted to help treat patients at the center even though he was not yet a doctor. The "little hospitals" handled ailments, such as diarrhea, heat rash and emotional problems stemming from incarceration.

Dr. Kageyama, who later finished his medical training in Portland after the war, said one patient died of measles.

Molly M. Kageyama, '41, married Milton Maeda, '38, on May 22, 1942, in the first wedding conducted in the Portland Assembly Center. The Gazette-Times dispatched termed the wedding "more excitement ... than the day the evacuation moved in."

Kageyama, a secretarial science graduate, signed the OSC loyalty letter even though she had graduated. Maeda was a junior engineer for the BPA. The article noted that the bride's father could not attend because he was held in an assembly center at Pinedale California, with other Hood River evacuees.

Life in the camps

Oregonians generally were sent to three of the ten federal camps for persons of Japanese ancestry: Minidoka, near Twin Falls, Idaho; Heart Mountain, Wyo.; and Tule Lake in the northern California desert. Oregon Staters interviewed for the most part didn't stay long;
they generally found work releases or enrolled at schools participating in the student relocation program. Their parents had fewer options and generally stayed at least until the exclusion was lifted.

According to The College Niels, Northwest Nisei were disproportionately represented among the first 400 relocated. Dr. O'Brien also noted that Washington and Oregon had higher proportions of college attendance than their populations warranted.

Yoshihara recalls arriving at Minidoka in a 1920’s redwood railroad car in the middle of a dust storm to a temporary home surrounded by barbed wire and armed sentries. The barracks, although somewhat better than the assembly centers, lacked furniture and had gaps that allowed the dust to settle on everything. Yoshihara said he was fire chief for the “Georgetown” district of the camp, a job that required him to put out fires now and then.

Yoshihara, who also worked in the fields and as a parcel driver at Minidoka, called the coach at Utah and landed a football scholarship at Utah and a job as a busboy. Marriage brought new responsibilities, so he worked in Detroit and other cities east of the exclusion zone. Yoshihara underwent a military physical but did not serve because of various football injuries. “I was a little guy even then,” he said of his days as an OSC end. “Most of the players outweighed me by a hundred pounds.”

Yada briefly played baseball in camp but was one of the first students to leave Tule Lake. He continued his agricultural studies at Nebraska and graduated on time in 1944.

Satō, a senior in pharmacy when he left OSC, was put to work assembling the Tule Lake pharmacy. Pharmacy Dean Ashadō Zelick unsuccessfully tried to place Satō at the University of Michigan (Zelick’s alma mater) or the University of Iowa, but Satō was able to complete his studies at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy with the help of the Quakers.

Kuge tried unsuccessfully to relocate to another medical school. “Even if I had gotten accepted, I didn’t have a lot of money.” His alternate route out of camp was enlisting in the Army.

Florence Yogi Fugami put her home economics training to work making the dusty camp habitable with vegetable and flower gardens. “We thought, ‘Oh no, we won’t be able to plant anything because of the dust,”’ she said “Someone else managed to make things grow.” She gave birth to her first child at Minidoka and settled for a time in Twin Falls, where her husband had a baking job. Outside the camp, she was discriminated against at the hospital during the birth of her second child.

Military service

Most Japanese Americans were discharged from military service soon after the start of the war. Others, like Masaki and Taro Arai, remained in the service throughout the war, despite a decision in 1942 to recruit Nisei to reclassify them as IV-C (not acceptable for training and service because of nationality or ancestry). Then in early 1943, federal authorities removed them from the camp to work as farm laborers. Nisei officially became draft eligible in early 1944, although some entered the service in 1943 via the draft and volunteering.

Oregon Staters who were in college at the time of the evacuation served in the Military Intelligence Service and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, known for distinguished service in Italy, where it rescued a “lost battalion” of Texans trapped behind enemy lines. Some were finished training just before VJ Day and helped with post-war government in Japan, repatriations, and prisoners of war.

Kuge, who served in the medical corps of the 442nd, attributes the team’s high performance to the educational attainments of its members. “One hundred percent of the members had graduated high school and over 50 percent had some college,” said Kuge, a retired Portland physician.

Satō, a retired Honolulu pharmacist, said Nisei service in the 442nd “proved that we were good Americans and made Hawaii a better place to live after the war.” Other Staters who served in the 442nd include Tom Arai, 42, and Tom Nambu.

After hearing from his local draft board in 1944, well before the exclusion orders were lifted, Yada said he traveled to Portland by train without incident and spent a few days in Brooks near Salem with Caucasian friends in the family of former state senator Ronald Jones.

Kinoshiba, who was drafted while attending Bradley University, completed language school around VJ Day and thus didn’t see combat. Instead he assisted with Japanese POWs in the Philippines and inspected jails for the public safety department in one prefecture of the U.S. occupation government. Kinoshiba, of Seattle, retired from an auto body partnership. Yada’s group of college-educated Nisei had no choice but to go to language school.

After nine months of training, he felt his Japanese was still inadequate. “The Caucasians were the valedictorians. They gave the speech, and we didn’t really understand,” said Yada, adding that Nisei who had stayed home with their parents performed better in language school than the college-educated Nisei. Yada was discharged from a career that included farming, supermarket management, and commercial fishing. Yoshimura, now of Milwaukee, is a retired farmer.

Families return home

Some of the Nisei soldiers were still in the military and others Staters were in school or working elsewhere when their parents returned from the camps to see what was left of their farms, other businesses and homes. Situations varied tremendously and often depended on the efforts of friends and neighbors.

Kuge’s family, which ran a tofu shop in Portland prior to the evacuation, “just lost everything,” while Kiyokawa’s family returned to a River orchard that had been reasonably well maintained by a niece who managed a fruit company and also like her sons baseball coach. Kiyokawa recently turned the family orchard over to a son. “I think we were lucky because we were the only ones because of him.”

Rebecca Landis is a Corvallis freelance writer and researcher. Photos at left by George classroom Jr.

Jack Yoshihara at age 14, in 1941. (UO Archives photo #497.)

Joseph Yoshikawa, who is finishing his OSU studies in zoology.