Life At Minidoka

A Personal History of the Japanese-American Relocation

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"Left Portland livestock building and rode a train overnight to Minidoka, Idaho. Arriving in the middle of a windstorm. Wondered what kind of lonely place I had arrived at. The coyotes howling at night added to the loneliness. Wondered if we would be killed or not."

The Japanese relocation—May 5, 1942. It was a frightening experience for many. This case history is meant to explain only a few of the memories that camp life had for one family.

In December, 1941, Japan declared war on the United States. 109,650 people of Japanese ancestry had to be removed from coastal strategic areas. Portland was one such area.

Relocation was a major change in anyone's past life style. Relocation sales occured. Articles of great sentimental value had to be burned to prevent the threat of "disloyalty" suspicions and accusations by the Caucasians.

". . . Anything with Japanese on it would be wrong to have, it would be incriminating. After dark, I would help my parents burn anything with Japanese on it. . . ."

The Japanese were at a tremendous disadvantage in selling their limited possessions. Shrewd businessmen knew the limited time the Japanese had to dispose of all their possessions and many goods were practically given away to the merchants. It was painful to see something sold to someone for two or three times the amount one received.

At the time of relocation, Tomeji "Tom" Mukaida and his wife Kow, had been married for fourteen years. They had arrived in the United States in their late teens and had lived in the United States for forty-one and twenty-one years respectively. They had a daughter, Takako, who was twelve and a half years old. Portland had been their home for many years and they were self-sufficient, hard workers in the restaurant business.

Tomeji was fifty-eight and Kow was forty-eight when the announcement arrived. This all occured at a time when their life was beginning to be very promising. For the first time, the family was making more than it spent and hard work was beginning to pay off. It was difficult to give up a life that one had come from Japan to obtain. Tomeji and Kow were also at an age where they

Takako and Mrs. Mukaida

were beginning to plan for retirement. Their lifestyles were in very set patterns. Their daughter was another case. Her life was still beginning. Explanations needed to be made that there were going to be some major changes made in their lives.

There was a great deal of fear from the sudden hatred and emotionality of the Caucasians. In speaking little or no English, there was an ignorance about the working of the entire system. Rumors of camp life and the possibility of being killed if one did not obey were out. It was easy to convince the poorly educated Issei that submission would be the best thing to do.

Fear was the greatest motivator. Fear made Kow and Tomeji register for relocation. Fear of being interned separately formed stronger family ties and created an atmosphere of submission. Fear of being deported was one of the two greatest fears that the family had about the relocation process. The other was death.

Being in a metropolitan city at the outset of war was also difficult. There was more chance for interaction between Japanese and Caucasians. The intense nationalism of the period also added to hostilities. Camp life and the uncertainty it carried was greatly feared but the hostility of the outside world was greater.

The hostility of the Caucasians was present all over the city. Open accusations were made and threats were common. Certificates were carried by many Japanese youths. They were citizens

recommendations, written by some influential and respectable member of society, testifying to the dependability and loyalty of the bearer to his country. Takako was given such a document by the Principal of her grade school. The document was carried around with her at all times.

On May 4, 1942, the Mukaidas went to report to the city jail to register. They went through the process of answering questions and being fingerprinted by members of the police force. Then all they could do was wait.

The Portland livestock building is a large compound located near the Oregon-Washington border. The interior of the building was sectioned off like the stalls of a stable. The smell of hay permeated the building and is one sensation still remembered today. Families were sectioned off and given small stalls in which they were to live until they were taken to Minidoka. There was a great deal of tension amid the people ordered there. A lot of questions were yet to be answered.

Minidoka is a semi-isolated city in the southeastern sector of Idaho. The climate differed greatly from that of Portland. Windstorms, sagebrush, unpaved streets and coyotes were new experiences for those of the inner city. Minidoka was also very lonely. The atmosphere was different from that of the city. The system of relocation was cold and impersonal. People were classified and numbered and forgotten.

Soon, the move to Minidoka began. For many this was the first major trip since they arrived in America. For many children this was their first train ride. People were crowded in the train and the reason for the trip saddened and subdued the usual atmosphere.

After arriving late in Minidoka, the military procedure began. Roll call was taken. Beds, blankets and barrack numbers were issued. Friendly, familiar faces were there to greet them, but the tension of the group was not relieved. The luggage had not arrived as the families went off to their new homes. It was near night when the process was over. There were fast and feeble attempts to make their new homes "comfortable." They were tired from the long train ride and there were difficulties in sleeping in the strange conditions.

Life in camp was different from anything the Mukaidas had ever experienced. "Home" was a one room barrack with little furniture and no luxuries. Privacy was an impossibility. The pay was low and conditions were poor. Out of necessity, life had to be made very simple.

There was little atmosphere of safety within the camp. Racial hatred on the outside was open and the fear of the Caucasians was

a real threat. There were imposed curfews. Going out in free society was associated with threats of lynching and death. Hostility from the nearby cities was intensely felt. The fear of being exposed constantly to this threat kept people from wanting to go outside of the camp and fear what would happen to them if they dare leave.

Young children were rapidly being forced into becoming small adults. Certain circumstances and fears had to be explained in case an adult would not be there. Many personal feelings had to be sacrificed to protect the general well-being of the family. The possibilities of death or separation had to be considered. Respect, out of fear, must be paid to all figures of authority.

There was a demand for respect and propriety the Japanese held for the government. The reason not to rebel was that it was unthinkable to go against a government one had lived under for so long. The loyalty issue and respect for older traditions and systems were the other reasons.

Weather at Minidoka gravely affected the life in camp. The location was prone to wind storms. This made any attempt at keeping the house clean difficult. Cleanliness was essential in the lives of many Issei and the situation was not entirely suitable for personal cleanliness. Rainy weather also made camp life more difficult. There were few paved walkways and daily trips needed to be made across the mud. There was no water or coal available within the house and trips to community restrooms daily were essential to the ideal of personal cleanliness.

Uncertainty was always present in camp life. There was uncertainty about jobs, money and their fate. They were fearful that they might not survive this experience.

Tomeji received a job as head cook shortly after arriving at camp. The pay was nineteen dollars a month. The position held much more prestige than the fact he was receiving top pay. His position held a great deal of respect among the other internees. Kow could not find employment. Family roles changed little. The father was still the breadwinner, the mother, the housewife.

Although receiving "top pay" and a $3.50 clothing allowance, money was a problem. There was no incoming money. Everything earned needed to be spent. Relatives on both sides were in no conditions to help the Mukaida family, Tomeji's relatives consisted of five brothers—all bachelors. Kows family was back in the old country and care packages were being sent to them prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, out of the modest restaurant supplies.

Fear of old age and retirement existed. Retirement age was not far off and savings were dwindling. Relocation had caused a loss of almost all investments. Funds the Mukaidas had saved went to

keep up the insurance policies to maintain some assurance that the rest of the family would be able to survive.

For Takako growing up in camp was often difficult. New friends had to be made. There was no time for having a childhood. Activities were limited due to income. Education was available only up through high school. Traditional Japanese customs of the times would not allow a girl to be educated further. College was a financial impossibility even with scholarships. New duties were placed upon Takako due to her mother's hernia. Work after school ended was inevitable. The extra money might make life a little easier.

The family structure was an important social institution. At all costs, the family came first. It was important in the case of the Mukaidas. The fact that they had a young child increased the responsibility. Tomeji was willing to volunteer for anything if it would help the condition of his family in any way. The dedication of the children for their parents was mutual.

Loyalty was vital. Tomeji felt a deep sense of loyalty to his country. America was a land of promise and success. He was grateful that it had fulfilled many of his expectations. He felt he was a good citizen in his heart and that was what was important.

The value of citizenship was contested by the young Nisei. Their status as citizens had little influence on their position. Other people "with whom the U.S. was at war" were free. Japanese-American boys of draft age wondered if they would be sacrificed and how much value America placed on their citizenship. The double standard was in effect and the result was not always the same.

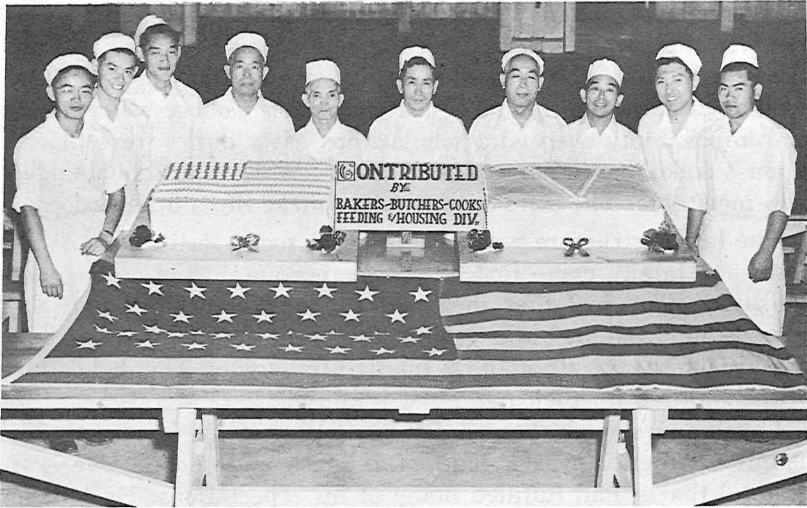
Education in camps was poor. Caucasian teachers were brought in from the outside. Many were biased and freely and openly admitted their prejudice. The hostility between these two groups prevented much real interaction and student and teacher relationships.

This in turn affected motivation. The drudgery of the same routine every day with no real effect was as discouraging as the poor schooling. There seemed no way to get ahead.

Conditions in camp were equally unpromising. The food served was bland. Certain foods were basic to camp life. The quality and the quantity of food varied. Kow faced a drastic change from a diet of Japanese food to the American food. A "treat" was usually getting extra food at the canteen to be cooked back at the barrack.

Camp barracks consisted of army barracks. They were small, one room apartments. The furniture consisted of two beds, two chairs, one desk and a pot-bellied stove. Bathing and washing were in a centralized area. Coal and water had to be carried from great

distances. Walls were thin. Everything could be heard. There was no place to be alone.



Privacy became very valuable. Community bathing and hygenic facilities were found degrading. Young boys used to peer through the vents making this necessity seem worse.

The life in general of a relocation camp was very Americanized. Traditional sports and social groups were formed. American holidays were celebrated.

With time, the strict discipline of the camp was eased. The rule of not going within three feet of the fence or be shot was not as threatening. Ventures outside of camp proved to be less fearful than imagined. Brave stunts such as sneaking out were attempted; Takako said: "As the years went on (2½ years or so) I remember going with my friend and her uncle fishing. At the end of the camp, we all crawled under the barbwire fence to get out and under the barbwire to get back in."

The diet in these times became limited. Fish and eggs were the basic foods during the last months. This was particularly difficult for the Mukaidas for they were used to a varied diet and fish was intensely disliked.

After some time, farmers from nearby cities needed extra labor at harvest time. Money was scarce so many went although they were fearful of doing so. This fear proved itself to be true. One worker who went ". . . got beat up savagely and was called a dirty Jap."

After the war, leaving camp was equally difficult. When the order was given to begin the move back home, many doubts occurred. The existing hostility that was present prior to relocation had intensified by the fervor of pro-nationalism.

In leaving, the relocation bureau gave each evacuee $25.00 to begin life again in a free society. The same process of gathering one's belongings together began. There was another train going back to Portland.

Arriving in Portland was a comforting thought. Familiar sites and faces greeted them. This was and always would be home to the Mukaidas.

The Oregon Buddhist Church once again opened its doors to the evacuees. The large, two-story building had many rooms where families took up residence until the relocation agency could provide them with jobs and adequate housing. Small trunks and sentimental objects left with the church were returned. The church had remained true to the Japanese. It provided moral support prior, during and after the relocation.

Good paying jobs were hard to secure. All members capable of working had to work. If one spoke English, the chances for getting a job were good. Tomeji received employment as a cook and a houseboy while Takako had a housekeeping job with a prominent family in town. Kow, due to her hernia and inability to speak English, could not find employment.

Beginning life again was difficult. People were hostile:

". . . a stranger (woman) said to me, "Japs are back! Kill them or send them back to the old country."

Money was limited. Takako making $50.00 and Tomeji's income of $125.00 did not accumulate fast. Life held only a faint glow of promise. The dream life that they had prior to relocation seemed a long way off.

Relocation taught the family many things. It taught the necessity of practicality with a limited income. Luxuries were not a way of life. The stomach always came first. Soon the Mukaidas had saved enough to begin their own restaurant again. Equipment was purchased as cheaply as possible. A restaurant was purchased by the waterfront on First Avenue. The family lived above the restaurant. It was family owned and run, so there were no outgoing wages. Tomeji had learned how to be a "model minority." It was necessary to use one's wits to survive.

Hostility of the Caucasians was still present in business transactions. Two major firms proved to be hard on the Japanese. It

was strongly felt that higher prices and lower quality goods were sold to Japanese merchants. Strangers were also hostile and accused freely without thinking and without knowledge of their experience during the war. To be successful amid a large group of Caucasians, certain roles had to be played.

Certain traits have remained from the stigma of relocation. The necessity of selling everything at the time of relocation made everything they had of great importance. Breakage was minimum. Great care was taken with everything. If something was broken it might not be replaced. Possessions of the camp years still linger and are periodically brought out.

A great deal of pride is also associated with relocation. There is no more open hatred against the Japanese. The difficulties and misfortunes suffered during this time have been uncovered. People and college students in the past three years have gone to the Portland area Nisei and brought honor to the individuals chosen in the study. The injustices suffered are out in the open now.

Privacy and protection are the two most important values the Mukaidas treasure. Locked doors, secret savings and individual rooms of their own are all a part of these values. Everyone has his own room in which his or her personal privacy and secrets are kept. Protection of oneself and material goods is instinctive. Locked doors and intense fear of theft is always present.

There is still some inner dislike for Caucasians. Many goods that the Mukaidas could not bring back with them were broken rather than leaving them at camp or giving them to others. Racial biases are still somewhat strong. Intercultural marriage, although not forbidden, is looked down upon. Some members of society carry intense emotional scars and open hatred on both sides.

Certain foods are still shunned. The diet consists basically of meat and new food is cooked for every meal. Food is a very important necessity for the Issei. An abundance of food within the house is a necessary element for peace of mind. Food cannot be left over or thrown out.

Strong family responsibility also is important. Divorce, except in extreme cases is unlikely in the Nisei population with children and unheard of in the Issei group. The future of the Sansei is of the utmost concern. The Issei have a lot of pride in their grandchildren. The family structure of the Sansei is becoming less structural and less rigidly defined.

The Japanese community is still highly structured. It is just beginning to spread from the city to other parts of the city. There is a loyalty among the Japanese to other Japanese merchants and

businesses. People loyal to the Japanese prior to the war received their loyalty in the postwar years.

The experience of the relocation still lives in the homes of the Japanese. The experience cannot be fully explained unless one has lived through it. Reminders are still present. Small cloth bags filled with ration points are still among the things brought back from camp. Pieces of art work, newspaper clippings, pictures of camp life, barracks, block pictures and other valuables are just the faint memories of a time the Japanese would not want anyone to ever experience again.

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CORRESPONDENCE

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Sept. 30-Oct. 20 - General Information on the Sentiments of Relocation.
Oct. 25-Nov. 16 - Questionnaires I & II. Verifications on unclear information.

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