

## Bellingham's Japanese Residents Never Returned

by Carole Teshima Morris

The time was February 1942, two and a half months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the day after the Bellingham City Council endorsed a resolution adopted by the Whatcom County Shrine Club calling for removal of all alien enemies, including American-born Japanese, to concentration camps

About noon on a Wednesday, Bellingham police arrested two men in the Sunrise Cafe on West Holly St. They were John T. Nishimura, 25, of Tacoma, and Shigeru Sakamoto, 29, residing in Tacoma but born in Bellingham. Both men were American citizens. Nishimura was charged with vagrancy and Sakamoto with driving without a license. Two hours after their arrest, they were sentenced to 10 days apiece in jail.

Confiscated snapshots, reportedly of a bridge, a U. S. training ship, the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Company (now Georgia-Pacific) and a newspaper photo of the Emperor of Japan were turned over to U. S. Immigration authorities along with several papers. A day later, Sakamoto's driver's license and draft registration card were turned in to police by his sister. Apparently Sakamoto had left his wallet at his father's house across the street from the cafe. Police chief Clifford Blodgett also confirmed that word had been received from Tacoma that Nishimura, who operated a restaurant there with a brother, was also in possession of a draft registration card. Despite these findings, the men remained in jail until their sentences had been completed.

Six days following his release, Shigeru Sakamoto was again arrested, this time with his father Shim, who operated a general merchandise store on Holly St. and had been a Bellingham resident since 1900. Their arrests followed a search by the F. B. I. for "contraband" in the elder Sakamoto's residence. The search

yielded nothing suspicious, however, and no charges were filed.

Fumiko Sakamoto, the sister, later made a statement to the press asserting the loyalty of herself and her family to the United States. She said, "They found nothing because we are complying with the laws of our government in every way." She spoke of her pride in citizenship and the family's desire to remain in Bellingham, but said that if the government decided to move them elsewhere they would obey without complaint.

She also produced copies of the confiscated snapshots. The picture of the pulp mill was taken from the back porch of the Sakamoto store following a snowstorm several years before. The bridge picture was of her brother, taken while visiting friends in Blanchard in 1935. She also maintained that the newspaper clipping was never in her brother's possession at all, a fact later confirmed by police.

The Sakamoto incident was an unfortunate prelude to the end of the pre-war Japanese American community in Whatcom County. On May 22, 1942, placards appeared instructing all Japanese aliens and citizens to report for registration at a Western Defense Command control center in Burlington. Transportation was provided.

The exact number of evacuees in Whatcom County is unclear. Reports indicate that besides the 33 members of families permanently residing in the area, several workers at oyster beds on Chuckanut Drive were also evacuated.

On June 3, those who had not already left the area packed only what they could carry and boarded a bus which took them to Burlington, where they departed by train for Tule Lake Internment Camp.

Among those who boarded the bus that day were two graduating seniors from Bellingham High School. They were not present to receive their diplomas in the ceremony held that night.

The others were Tom Amano and his family, who farmed near Wiser Lake; George Asano, who operated the Chili Parlor on State St.; Harry Okamoto and his family, who operated Oka Dye



Works on State St.; Kalie Okamota, a janitor at Adam's Style Store, and his wife Chiyoko; the Okubo family, who operated the Sunrise Cafe, recalled by area pioneers as a good place to go for a nickel cup of coffee and doughnut; the Sakamoto family; Toshio "Harry" Shima, a janitor at Wahl's Department Store, and his family; and Sam Sumihiro and his family.

There was no time to tie loose ends before they left. Although the government stored large pieces of furniture, many things had to be sold or abandoned. Okubo left his home with a "for sale" sign on the front wall. Sakamoto's store, a landmark which had previously housed the offices of the Pettibone Brothers and M. G. Scouten, a realtor and timberland specialist, was torn down the week of departure. His stock which was piled ceiling-high, had been liquidated earlier at ridiculously low prices.

Three years later, the Western Defense Command rescinded the evacuation order freeing the internees to return to their homes. According to newspaper accounts, Bellingham did not attack the decision as several communities did farther south. In fact, the local Albert J. Hamilton Post of the American Legion, warned against hysteria and "poorly considered actions." The post's Americanism committee pointed out that all citizens were entitled to their rights as guaranteed by the Constitution. They recognized that the majority of Japanese who had resided in Whatcom County were American born and that six of these had or were serving in the U. S. military, including one who was killed in action and another wounded.

A number of other local organizations raised the issue of what to do if any of the former residents returned, but no action was taken. It seemed unnecessary. There are no accounts in local newspapers, no listing in phone books or city directories or in courthouse records. As far as can be determined now, not one of those people returned to Whatcom County.

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