

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories
Andy Frazer

George Ishikawa: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

Keywords: Japanese-American Internment, Santa Anita, Heart Mountain, Draft Resistance

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Oral Histories

Interview: George Ishikawa (1915-2014)
Interviewer: Andy Frazer
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Biographical Note: During WWII, George Ishikawa's family was forcibly moved from their home in San Mateo to the Santa Anita Assembly Center (Arcadia, CA), then to the Heart Mountain war relocation camp (Cody, Wyoming). When the U.S. Army began drafting Japanese-American men from within the war relocation camps, George became known for his outspoken views on draft resistance.

You're an American:

George: It was leading to war, [my father] he was reading the two Japanese papers. He had an idea of where the thing was heading. And, the thing that I remember most was that he was getting alarmed at the tone of the war that was coming. So, he always said, he doesn't want war, he never wanted war. "But, if it comes to that" he said, "Remember, you're an American". And, he said, "If the news gets worse and you have to serve, you're an American. That's where you belong. You don't owe the Japanese country anything, because they couldn't provide for me. So," he said, "I expect you if it does come to war that you'll serve under this country."

So, that's what he told us kids, that we're Americans, we have to serve.

Freeze:

Interviewer: Can you tell me where you were living at the time, when you heard about Executive Order 9066?

George: Well, see it was somewhere in the middle of March. My folks were living in Mountain View, so it was a Sunday night, we were returning home to San Mateo. In those days you had the radio on in the cars and it was around 12 o'clock and a flash came on the news that we were going to be frozen where we were at that day. So, if you wanted to move, you had to move then or you'd be frozen where you were. So, my wife happened to be pregnant at the time and she wanted... We were going to be frozen and I'd be in San Mateo and I can't move out of there. So, we decided the next morning that if we're going to be frozen then we better move out of here, because it was our first birth deal. And she

wanted to be,[inaudible]. So, we decided to move out of there that day and by 6 o'clock we were out of San Mateo and moved to Mountain View.

Before Evacuation:

Interviewer: When did you and your family have to leave Mountain View for the evacuation?

George: It was sometime in June. All that time we were just frozen, so I'd given up work and all that, because they weren't definite about when we were going to be moved out. My mother lived in Mountain View. Her folks lived in Mountain View too.

Interviewer: What did you have to do to prepare for evacuation?

George: See it was a lot of headache those days, because they never came out definitely where we were going. So, we didn't know what to buy, heavy clothes or summer clothes or whatever. So, it was a mad house. So, we bought what we thought we'd be able to bring. And with everybody trying to find the same kind of thing in the store, it was hard to find what... There was always somebody ahead of you that had bought it already. So, we waited until around the end of June we were moved out of Mountain View.

Interviewer: And you went by train?

George: Yeah. But we went to the station... Somebody brought us to the station.

Interviewer: Did you have to sell all of your possessions?

George: Well, that's what hurt. Like my wife had a brand new washing machine. She paid over a hundred dollars for it and when we offered it for sale, we got a telephone call saying "Five dollars". She'd only used it once.

So that's why, I worked for a lady that says... I talked to the problem we were having, that have to get rid of our stuff. And she said, "Well, I've got a basement that's not so big, but you can put most of your things there". So, I was lucky that I worked for this lady. But the little stuff, like cars and like I said washing machine, and every other thing. The first time I had an offer for this \$100 washing machine, she was talking about \$5, because that's what she paid to have hers repaired. So, for \$5 she thought she could buy a ... Because if we didn't get rid of it we'd have to just leave it there. So, that how it is. It was a mad house.

Possessions:

Interviewer: When did you actually have to report for evacuation?

George: It was the latter part of June. See all this time we had been running around like crazy not knowing what to buy or what we should do with what we had. The lucky ones, the Caucasians stored them for them. But, like us with the farming, we didn't have Caucasians, you know, so we had to find a place to put it or sell it or just leave it.

Ride to Santa Anita:

George: The only thing I remember is we started out at about 4 o'clock for the station and about 6 o'clock they began handing out box lunches. So, I was lucky, because I loved beef tongue and that kind of stuff, but my father he didn't believe in eating that kind of meat. So, he gave all his meat portion to me and he lived on bread, because he couldn't eat that stuff, because in Japan they didn't touch that kind of meat. So, I was... I had all kind of lunch I could eat, where as my father, he's eating bread. Overnight, we got there in the morning around 8 o'clock. See because we had to stop for every other train that was on the track, because we didn't have any priority. So, every time the train got to... Like my father, he couldn't sleep because I don't know they or whatever, because every time they come to halt or start you'd get shaken out of your seat, whereas the regulars just glide out and glide in, but this one would shake you to pieces. If you want to sleep, you can't sleep because they shake you up.

Santa Anita Assembly Camp:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what it was like at the Santa Anita Assembly Center?

George: We got there around 8 o'clock in the morning I know that. We had our baggage was emptied and inspected, so we got through around somewhere close to noon.

Interviewer: Did they assign you to a job while you were at Santa Anita?

George: Well, after we finished the inspection of our baggage that we were bringing in and they assigned us to our room. And then, they called us in and assigned us to different work in the camp. And, after all this thing that we had gone through, I was in no mood to be told you've got work here or there, but the trouble was, the army would come in and the next day this party, whoever gave his mouth piece, he wasn't there anymore. You know, that's how they kept everybody in line, because you didn't want to get separated from your family, so you just kept your mouth shut and did whatever they told you to do.

Because, I remember this [inaudible] was a dentist from, I think Salinas, and he was talking about the food that they were getting, somebody's making money because no matter how they try to tally up the cost of the food that they were giving us, somebody's hijacking a lot of money. Well, the next day we were wondering where he went, because we don't see him. Well, during the day the Army came and put him on a jeep and nobody knew where he went. So, you have a thing like that and your only thing you have is your family, you're not going to fight them for [inaudible], you just want to stay together.

Trip to Heart Mountain:

George: The trouble was my wife was in her around (I forget what it was) the middle of the last month or whatever. She would have been housed at the hospital, of course it wasn't hospital, but a regular house and there were about twenty pregnant girls that were unsafe to be moved so they stayed back. When I left I was on the next to the last train out of Santa Anita for Santa [inaudible]. So, she couldn't travel so I had traveled by myself. Like I said, it took us a long, long, time because like I said, the train would stop every so often if there was an oncoming train, you know. So, anyway we got there around 11 or 12 o'clock in the night. I remember when the train stopped at the station in Utah and parked the car to load water and coal, because that one ran on coal. And, when that train stopped there and said anybody want to stretch their legs can go outside, so the all these young kids they were whooping and hollering when they got to get outside the train and in snow. The railroad men said don't worry they'll wear out, 10 minutes later they're all frozen, they want to come in. You know they only had California clothes, but soon as the cold penetrated they're coming in.

Arrival At Heart Mountain:

Interviewer: When did you arrive at Heart Mountain?

George: Well, my son born October 29th, he was born then in Los Angeles. Because, on the 29th of October, I was at the stop, the railroad stop in Utah. That's how I remember it.

Interviewer: Do you remember the time of day that you arrived?

George: We got there around 12 o'clock, I think it was, it was dark. Most of us had persons who were on the previous trains and had been assigned rooms, you know. Well, they called it apartments.

Interviewer: They were more like barracks.

George: Yeah, barracks.

Interviewer: Army barracks.

And work protest:

George: They assigned us to different work and like us we assigned to camouflage nets. You know what they are. We got to weave different colored stripes into ... we worked on the ground. They didn't have the stool so we had to work on the nets on the ground. But anyway, we weren't very good workers because we were still griping, you know, after 60

dollars a month and in the hot sun. Santa Anita's hot. So, we were just doing what we were supposed to do, not trying to excel or anything just working, because if we don't do what they tell us, we don't know where we'll end up.

We did finish their contract for them, but at one part these nets they were hanging across the grandstand, they strung them across there and then would bring them down and then we would have to go weave the stripes.

Well, that particular afternoon, everything seemed to be quiet upstairs because usually they're talking and yelling and ... it's quiet. So, I remember my friend and I were wondering what's happening up there that's supposed to be weaving those fishnets and instead they'd dropped them all down. They're not finished or nothing, they all just put the nets down, so we were wondering what's happening. Then the people overhead of us started to walk out, so what's happening here? We better walk out too.

So, we walked out and what do you know? Some of the people at the commotion were coming back to take care of their apartments because, what the people that were returning were saying was that they're inspecting all the apartments, you know and they confiscating... Well the worse thing was, they confiscating baby food even. Because, see you didn't know what kind of supplies they're getting for the kids so a lot of us bought baby food to bring in case they had to rely on what they have, they'd be stuck so a lot of...

So, what got the crowd mad was that they were confiscating the baby food, so we thought that's a limit to what they should do to us. So, it finally got big and they stopped. So, everybody stopped working on the nets that day, because there's no excuse for them to take baby food away even. Because, see it was a riot but it never got in the papers.

Resistance Part 1:

George: Well the first thing that got us thinking was they classified us to 1A Enemy Alien. And that didn't stick well with us, we were born like I said, my father taught us how we should if it came to that.

Well anyway after the war started, in our block there were two young men lost their lives at the beginning and then we heard rumors that they were trying to form a suicide battalion, you know. So, some of the people, the leaders thought that was the limit, to say you're an enemy alien and put you in a suicide squadron. So, they didn't... See the trouble was we had no leaders and nobody wanted to stick their head out, when you see people being shipped out of camp to a super camp.

So, at the beginning there wasn't much opposition, because we learned how to keep quiet, you just stomach what they give you and just don't say anything. So, that's how the camp people ran, I know that's how I ran. I was in no shape to think about anything else, because the only thing that we had was the clothes on our back. But, as time passed there was some of these who had guts and there was two people that got together and they decided to walk

out of camp. They said, "What do you know? The sentries raised their guns, pointing at us, they were ready to shoot us." So, they came back to camp and once you hear that story, nobody else tries it, because you don't want to get shot, because you've got heavy responsibility with your family now.

Resistance Part 2:

Interviewer: Were you given the questionnaire, about your loyalty to the United States? And, do you remember how you thought about answering it?

George: Well, see there were two ways to think about it. It wasn't a straight forward question. So, what I said is "If the enemy flies in where the enemy comes to this country, I would fight but I wouldn't fight anybody else." That was just my answer, but it didn't mean anything, it just a plausible motion to get us to sign. Se we weren't into politics, so it was something that we were real late in recognizing that there has to be some sort of cohesion or otherwise we won't get nowhere, because regardless what we do, they've got the upper hand.

So anyway, there was... I think it was Block 20 these two people lived; they got to come to say, "We're not being protected by the Constitution, so we have a right to ask for our rights to be restored and when everybody's in the same mood but couldn't express it, but now they've got somebody to express it, they joined up.

Interviewer: They joined up to the military?

George: No, no, for this movement to have our rights recognized, at least take down the barbed wires and have entry, all the stuff that you... Well we used to call it "Bill of Rights", we wanted it restored, because during our situation... But they didn't care; they just kept ignoring us.

Resistance Part 3:

George: There were some people writing to the English section of the paper and up until then I had never thought of anything, you know. I just wanted to cooperate as much as I could, without jeopardizing myself or compromising myself, let's put it that way, because I really didn't believe that they were doing us right. But, when you're involved in politics and we were, because the Japanese community was such a small community that we never were talked about being politically minded, it just got to all the minority they wouldn't care about.

So, then I wrote a letter one time, I thought, "Well, I better try something in my own little way", so I wrote a letter to the one party that led the revolution. I wrote the letter to him, because he was recognized as the one that was leading the group and somehow he read the letter, it was assigned to him anyway, because that was the only person I knew of by name,

you know, and who was brave enough to try to get out of camp and get stopped. So, I had never known who he was or what, but I figured well, he's the party I should write to.

So, I wrote him a letter and what do you know, the letter gets printed in the camp paper. He said, "I didn't hope the letter to be printed by them", but evidently it slipped there. So he had the letter published by the paper, camp paper, then a newspaper reporter by the name of... Have you ever heard of a reporter by the name of Dave Imura[?]? He was a newspaper writer for Japanese papers in English. Well he got the letter to this party and somehow, the opposition they didn't think nothing of it. So he had it published in the Japanese, you know, camp paper and what do you know? It struck a note in the people, because it was mostly what a person felt in camp and what was wrong with what they were doing to us. And, when he had this letter published in the camp paper, their distribution doubled and tripled, because I had written as much as how I felt as an individual and it probably reminded them of their situation, that struggle that we were going through and they didn't do anything for us.

So, anyways the paper's distribution doubled and tripled. And, then all of a sudden these letters aren't printed anymore. And, I was wondering, "He's a newspaper writer, he has a right to write what he thinks is right, you know. Then later on I heard from others that the government had intervened and said, "If you keep printing these articles, we're going to close you up". So, an independent businessman to lose everything he has, let the government shut him up, he caved in. He was still allowed to write, but not on this kind of stuff.

And Outside Camp:

George: Well anyway, things were going from here to there and people were getting excited. This letter, I guess, woke a lot of people up, that's why they were getting such an answer to it. So, they like I said, they had to close up the paper. See, like this riot that they had in camp, people outside never knew about it. And, the people that were involved in it a lot didn't even know what happened, really happened, they were just following the crowd. But, anyway they closed him up, so the only outlet that we had was closed.

Resistance Part 4:

George: They instituted the draft and there was a few of us that went against them drafting us without restoring our rights. And so, all together in that group there was, I think 63 who got imprisoned. All together there was about 300 some people in all the different camps. See what happened was, when they started the draft at the beginning only one in five responded; the rest held out. It got to a point where people would not go, but on the next call they would go. They were afraid to go it alone and if somebody was with them they'd go. I mean, they would not go and that kept up for a few days and I remember this leader saying, "You ever heard of Okamoto? They want to stop this whole thing". He got to a point where five went and one stayed back, and I can remember him saying, "This is getting to be

an exercise in futility, we've got all that backing but when it comes down to backing your word with actions, everybody doesn't really believe enough to you know..." So, he said, "This is getting to be an exercise in futility." We had the backing in the crowds, but when it came to actually not going, they broke down.

END OF INTERVIEW