

## Wicked Cool Stories

---

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories

Andy Frazer

---

# Jim Maeno: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

Keywords: Japanese-American Internment, Tulare Assembly Center, Gila Internment Camp

---

See other interviews and oral histories at: <http://wickedcoolstories.blogspot.com/>

Wicked Cool Stories  
Oral Histories

Project: Wicked Cool Stories  
Interviewee: Jim Maeno  
Interviewer: Andy Frazer  
Interview Date: 2011  
Interview Place: Sunnyvale, CA  
Transcriber: Stina316 (Fiverr.com)  
Editor: Andy Frazer

**Biographical Note:** Jim Maeno's family was living east of Santa Barbara, CA at the beginning of WWII. After Executive Order 9066, Jim's family was forcibly moved to the Tulare Assembly, and finally to the Gila River internment camp in Arizona. Jim contacted me after reading about my portrait project in our local newspaper, the Sunnyvale Sun.

**Interviewer:** Could you begin by telling me where you're from, and after Executive Order 9066, which assembly center they sent you, and which internment camp?

**Jim Maeno:** We went from Santa Maria [CA] to Tulare<sup>1</sup>, and I guess we spent six months in Tulare, this was in 1942 or 1943, somewhere in that neighborhood, and then off to Gila, Arizona<sup>2</sup>.

Both my parents, my mom and dad, were there, but apparently my dad actually was shipped off to Bismarck, North Dakota<sup>3</sup>, because he was not a US citizen. My mom was born in Barstow, California, but then later on, I don't know when, she contracted tuberculosis. In fact, quite a few Japanese in Gila had tuberculosis, called TB. All I know was that she was sent to Santa Barbara hospital, in county hospital. Because we're from Santa Maria, California, so Santa Barbara County. So she went to the county hospital there. I saw my mom for the first time when we came back from Arizona.

All I know was that my dad had various jobs apparently at the camp. I know the barracks we lived in was called 63-10D. That was the barrack number that we were assigned to when we lived there. I have very little memory of that. The only memories I have are like... I

---

<sup>1</sup> Tulare Assembly Center: [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Tulare\\_\(detention\\_facility\)](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Tulare_(detention_facility))

<sup>2</sup> Gila River internment camp: [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Gila\\_River/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Gila_River/)

<sup>3</sup> Fort Lincoln (Bismarck, N.D.) Detention Facility:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort\\_Lincoln\\_Internment\\_Camp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Lincoln_Internment_Camp)

know there was an outdoor theater, and it was cold, I heard coyotes out in the background. I remember as a kid, with another friend of mine named Ron Suzuki, we used to - once or twice, I don't know how often - but apparently there was a little bus, military bus, that went around the barracks. This was a Caucasian guy, American guy. He allowed us on, we'd ride around, and then he dropped us back. I have no idea how many times we did that, but I remember taking bus rides with him, just two kids, little tykes.

The only thing I could remember seeing, you know, the barbed wire, the fences and all that, and the towers. There were guards there. But I have very little memories of the actual camp itself. I've seen pictures of all that. And then of course I had two sisters and a brother at the time, and they've never spoken much of that. My brother is four years older than me, so he remembers a lot more. But he didn't speak too much actually. And my sister... they rarely talked about the camp experiences.

My dad was in Bismarck, North Dakota, and I don't know when he came back. My mom came down with TB so she had to be hospitalized and was sent to Santa Barbara County. We're from Santa Maria, so Santa Barbara County Hospital. So basically my uncle, Uncle Sam, raised the kids. There were two sisters, my brother and me. So there were four of us, so Uncle Sam really took care of us, basically. When we came back from the camps, he actually helped raise us because my dad became a gardener. I mean, he did try to get back and work as a truck driver, but he became a gardener, basically. Because the farm was a big sham back then. When we came back, all of that was totally gone.

My Uncle Sam who really raised our family, he was part of the US Army as an interpreter because he spoke fluent Japanese, too. He served in the Intelligence<sup>4</sup> for deciphering all Japanese messages and all that. Although he never spoke much about that at all. I know they recruited quite a few. I know that he served in the military and he would decipher all the Japanese codes and all that.

They were born in the states but they had moved to Japan as infants. So my mom actually never spoke English. She was born in the States. She didn't speak English. Sam obviously spoke fluent Japanese because he was raised basically in Japan and the States, in both. So he was fluent in both languages, luckily. Whenever I needed anything, I would go through my brother or my sisters. I can speak just real basic stuff. Being a little kid, I just didn't want the hassle of all that stuff, you know.

Even though we were born in the States and were called Americans, the Japanese were defeated by the Americans so they were inferior. So they didn't want to associate anything

---

<sup>4</sup> M.I.S. - Military Intelligence Service:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_Intelligence\\_Service\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Intelligence_Service_(United_States))

with Japanese. That's why I didn't want to speak the language or learn the language, only because of that factor. It's unfortunate but that was true. But that was the prevailing thought. A lot of the younger Japanese men just didn't want anything to do with anything Japanese. They just didn't. I think that's one reason why the Japanese, in schools, they did read well. They had to show they were superior, on equal par, if not better.

They're well-known, the Minami family, from Guadalupe actually which is ten miles west of Santa Maria. They own the big ranches, the big farms there. The Minami family, I mean he's a very wealthy man, he really did well. But he was a very generous man. So he was the one that originally hired my dad before the camps and all that. So we used to work for the Minami family basically. After the war, we had to start all over from scratch and my dad went and became a gardener.

The only conversation I would have is probably with my brother who is four years older than me. But then again, I guess he was 8 or 9. He actually had a rougher time coming back, because when I started grammar school, I would start in kindergarten or first grade, whereas he was in fourth grade; it was a little different. Kids would say things to him. Kids at that age knew what they were saying. Kids that were in kindergarten or first grade, they were only parroting what their [*inaudible*]. Luckily for me, I was the smartest kid in class, I was really good at sports, so right away I never had any problems all through my education because I was really smart and good all the way through.

There really was a Santa Maria. It was a Japanese community there. But most of them hung out in Guadalupe with the farmers, not so much in Santa Maria. So we were sort of the oddball family, my dad being a gardener. There was only a couple of other gardeners. Most of them went back in the farming community, so that's why I didn't associate with the Japanese-Americans in Santa Maria.

END OF INTERVIEW