

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories

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Jimi Yamaichi: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

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Oral Histories

Project: Wicked Cool Stories
Interviewee: Jimi Yamaichi
Interviewer: Will Kaku, Andy Frazer
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Biographical Note: During WWII, Jimi Yamaichi's family was forcibly moved from their home to the Pamona Assembly Center (Los Angeles County, CA), then to the Heart Mountain war relocation camp (Cody, Wyoming) and, eventually, the Tulelake war relocation center (Tulelake, CA). Jimi is one of the founders of the Japanese-American Museum of San Jose.

Interviewer: Jimi, could you talk about why you feel it's important to preserve the Japanese-American story?

Jimi Yamaichi: Well why to preserve the Japanese-American story? I think it's still that far as my experience goes back in the war years. I used to be in charge of a construction in Tule Lake. I had approximately 250 men working under me. And then as we have coffee break or stuff, the Issei folks will always say, I mean whenever it is every day they say the same thing over and over and over. This is in Japanese, "[foreign language 0:28]" "The trying". Our future's unknown so it's very trying because here they are, they have little kids going around. They start from scratch, actually no car, no house, no beds, no mattress, no pots and pans. I think that's the reason why the museum, to me, it's very important that this story is kept alive.

The Isseis will say, "[foreign language 0:03]" The trying. Our future's unknown. This is very, very trying. Which is not the right translation, but then again given the idea of anybody leaving camp; the majority of them got \$25 and that's all they've got from the camp. And that went \$25 on their hand and started life all over again without knowing nobody. There were just a lot of people that would live in the valley, came to San Jose, Watsonville, Salinas people, came to San Jose not knowing very few people. Lived in barns and lived in tents just looking for their family, all piled into one house. Each family get one bedroom and they lived together like that. It's not a comfortable thing but then they have to do it. That's the only way they can survive.

Isseis as I see them when I was growing up, they never say how tough it was or how hard it was. They just went out and worked and showed us that anything can be conquered. And I think the story of their struggle had to be saved because of the fact that I, myself, like other

older Isseis and I'm classifying "older Isseis" that I been 86 today. But remember, that our Isseis, how we worked through the Depression years. The discussion comes up and you know if you went through the Depression, you know how hard it was and how the Isseis, even though they didn't have very much, they're trying to do with what they have and not complain and just work from sunrise to sunset and some. We learned to work hard and not to complain. So even like [when] they're coming out of camp, they never complain. They just run up their work. And I think those are the kind of stories that we have to keep and preserve and tell our younger generations.

Interviewer: Jimi, could you talk about your goals for the Japanese-American Museum of San Jose?

Jimi Yamaichi: Well the museum will show mostly the good part, because that's all they have. It also has the bad part. I got to tell a little funny story about the bad part of it. Like our old folks did love to drink. And actually, when they're drunk they drive their cars. They will get into an accident, this and that. And then that hurting, the judge will send them for ten days in jail for drunken driving. In here they can go off and hire somebody to sit in jail for them for ten days. So, it will hurt them. They still keep on drinking and get drunk [and] driving and get caught. Those kinds of funny stories. But they were here to help each other. I mean, if a guy gets drunk and get in trouble, right away they would see if they could help him out and get out of jail...

I think the worst part of it is the part of the hardship. The Isseis, especially the Japanese Isseis, even with the parents, they never talk about the hardship. They won't talk how tough it was during the Depression years, how they had to start from scratch and say what they can do to make a living. That's the reason why so many of the youngsters have a hard time understanding the Isseis because they don't talk about that. They don't hear the Isseis saying, "Oh, we struggled more during the Depression years..."

Interviewer: Jimi, could you talk about Eiichi [Sakauye]'s¹ role getting the museum started?

Jimi Yamaichi: Eiichi got involved with us. We knew him before the war. But Eichii coming back from camp; he was one of the first Isseis that got into the community, American activity like the School Board. He was first to join the School Board. [And] one of the first to join the Santa Clara County Fairground Board; the farmers group and History San Jose. Eichii had a really strong mind, and it was probably seen. He was in charge [of] the farming at Heart Mountain. He wrote down every item that they raised, how many pounds, and so forth. And he raised things there that he could never raise anyplace else through discussing with other people that come from the cold country farming, because were warm country farmers, and how he was able to kick-start the crops. I was kind of involved with him, and I was in construction at Heart Mountain. We discussed how we can grow something? We have no money to build greenhouses. And we had hotbeds. Eichii was saying, "Let's make

¹ Eiichi Sakauye <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2012/2/7/eiichi-sakauye/>

hotbeds.” The ground freezes at six feet down at Heart Mountain so the only way we can is to create heat from the bottom up. How can we do that? Well, Eichii we all knew, he would call it humus. So he got straw and cow manure, horse manure, any kind of manure that would create heat and mix it up. We’ll dig a big trench and be down there about 4 or 5 feet deep and fill with straw and cow dungs and then that creates the heat.

Eichii was a very futuristic type of person. Looking in the future because he looked at his dad, how his dad preserved things in the farm. I think he wanted to keep on that legacy of his farm and that to keep on the legacy of the Japanese. Besides, Eichii was very industrious, innovative. He built a forklift from parts from Army surplus and made a four-wheel drive forklift. He made a pear sorting machine that could be taken out in the field and be running so that they can sort the pears out in the field without doing it by hand. He was always thinking, “What can I do better myself?” And every day at life he tries to better himself. And then for the farmers he tries to better for them too and improve their farming and how to make life easier. Before it was sorting by hand, and that’s when I heard of the machine. It runs it through and just drops different sizes and gets the pears sorted. I think that’s very important that he really was thinking ahead but gradually, naturally, his pear orchard went down to other type of farming. But still he had the idea of improving everything. You visit his farm and look at some of the things that he built. It’s unbelievable.

I think the most important thing to leave behind the future generation is not so much to struggle but how we cope with the hardship. And how the Americans looked at us as non-American yet we were able to prove that we were Americans. I think that’s the whole thing that we got to leave behind, the legacy that we were born as immigrant child but we were all Americans. We lived like the Americans, and we did like the Americans I think. And showed the Americans that we were industrious enough and came ahead and provided for the community. Let’s say, the legacy behind this Japanese legacy.

Okay. The museum is, I would say, for reflection of the Japanese character, Japanese background. I think how we struggled to fight this combination. And I think today, like the Muslims when they were the Iraq War started, they were treated very harshly because they look like the enemy. And like us, we looked like the enemy back in 1941. Naturally we were really crucified for looking... Yet we had nothing to do with the war. Just as much as the Muslim people, their second generation. They had nothing to do with the war. They’re American citizens here but yet the American people... because you look like the enemy. That’s the harsh part of it. When the 9/11 came along, naturally they were really looked at that they are killer of the people. A thousand people were certainly killed. They were really chastised. And I stood up. On December the 7th, we had a rally at San Francisco and the younger generation asked me to speak on the behalf of Muslim people. [I said,] “You have to understand them. You have to learn to work with them and learn their culture. That’s the main thing just like our culture”. They have to understand, I think, the American people understand our culture. How we lived by the American standards. We lived in America, worked like an American. I think they do too, same thing. But, “Just understand them. Just work with them and get educated with them”. I think that’s very important.