

## Wicked Cool Stories

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Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories

Andy Frazer

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# Tom Nishikawa: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

Keywords: Japanese-American Internment, Poston War Relocation Center, Japanese-American Museum of San Jose, Gaman, "The Art of Gaman"

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Wicked Cool Stories  
Oral Histories

Interviewee: Tom Nishikawa  
Interviewer: Andy Frazer  
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*Bachelor's Section And Bug Collecting*

Our family was in Poston Camp 1. And Camp 1 consisted of probably... I don't know the exact number, let's say two-thirds of it was families. And it was a smaller section for all of the single men; the bachelor men that were housed in the same kind of barracks except that they were all single men that lived there. And they were probably in there from their 20's to their 50's, a whole range of ages.

And when I was really young, I remember going over there, befriending some of these bachelor men, and we'd have, I can't say a session, but we would meet with them, and they would - I'm not sure if we would entertain them or if they would entertain us - but anyhow, we would have a good time dealing with these bachelor men because families of course dealt with their own kids. These bachelor men, they didn't have any kids. We were their entertainment. Let's see, that was probably in 1944-1945 timeframe because I was like just about one year old in '42 when the internment came about. I was probably two or three years, maybe four years old, something in that order.

1944 and early '45 is when I was a kid in camp. And that's where... and we would... one of the things that the bachelor men would - I'd convince them to do - is make these little nets up and we would go after cicadas, moths, grasshoppers; and of course I had to go home and I stuck them in my pocket, you know? And then when I'd get home, my mom would say, "Alright, don't come in the house until you empty your pockets." And she'd literally take my pants off and empty all of the bugs out of it because she obviously didn't want any bugs in the house as bad as the house was at the time; it was a barrack.

*Dad Was Cook At Poston 1*

First of all, my dad - it's interesting because lately we went to this Japan festival in Santa Cruz, and they actually had burnt rice biscuits they were selling there at the Japan festival. I remember when I was a kid because my dad was a cook at Poston. And he worked in the kitchen, obviously, and they made rice in large containers. He had this layer of burnt rice, it's called koge, or black gohan, koge gohan on the bottom side. I mean it wasn't completely

black, it was just hard. They would serve all the white rice, of course, in the dining hall. But this little, maybe quarter-, half-inch stick of koge gohan on the bottom, they would break up. And when we'd clean the kitchen, the kids would come by to the back door of the kitchen and they would break them off, put a little salt on them, and hand them out to the kids. And I remember going to see my dad getting this koge gohan and... little candy, it's sort of like candy, but it was just something the kids ate. But it was interesting because here, 50 years later in Santa Cruz, they're selling this stuff; (laughs) like whoa!

### *Gaman And Dad's Carved Birds From Poston 1*

Yeah, my dad was one of the gentlemen that actually carved these birds. There was that book written by Daphne Hirasuna, it's called [\*The Art of Gaman\*](#).<sup>1</sup> But it's a book that chronicles a lot of the artifacts that were made by the people that were in camp. And my dad actually carved a lot of these birds. I looked at the book, *The Art of Gaman*, and the ones my dad made. What my dad did was really, really fine quality. Our family intends to donate it to the Smithsonian. Maybe we'll donate it here, I don't know. But he had made a collection of probably 20 or 30 birds. He went to an Audubon [???] carved the birds, painted them all the colors of the feathers - some are really beautiful, the ones that I really like are the ones that had the long, fluffy tails. Those, he did a number of those, they look absolutely beautiful, and the precisionness [sic] is what really fascinated me. I didn't realize how meticulous he was in making really fine lines, feather lines, because they're all painted on this piece of wood. And the birds were really small, like an inch and a half or so. He had done a whole bunch of these and again, I compared them to the ones in the book, and I'll tell you, the ones that he did are a heck of a lot more precision and much more precise. One of the things I intend to do is, I'm going to photograph them all and put them all on a Light Box, and I'm going to give them to all my brothers, because we're going to actually give the whole collection to the Smithsonian.

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<sup>1</sup> The Smithsonian American Art Museum presented an exhibition [\*"The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from Japanese American Internment Camps 1942-1946"\*](#) between 2010 and 2011.