

Former student receives degree 44 years late

By Chris Norred

Of the Emerald

When Michi Yasui Ando left the University 44 years ago, she was being sought by U.S. Army soldiers who wanted to relocate her in one of the internment camps that housed Japanese-Americans during World War II.

When she first returned last week, Ando was being sought by an army of reporters and photographers who wanted to tell her story.

"My grandson asked, 'How come grandma gets in all the papers and on TV?' Well, Tommy, set a record like I did, and you have it made," Ando said.

Ando's "record" was the 44 years she had to wait between the day she earned her degree in 1942 and the day she graduated from the University in 1986.

She was the honored alumna and center of attention at University commencement exercises June 15, when she finally received her diploma for the bachelor's degree she completed in 1942.

The story began when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II. Wartime hysteria led the Roosevelt administration to suspend the civil rights of Japanese-Americans, who were forced to move from their West Coast homes to internment camps. An evening curfew was imposed on Japanese-Americans who had not yet been taken to the camps.

The only Japanese-American at the University in 1942 was Ando, a popular, bright and active young woman from Hood River, who was completing her senior year in the education department.

Ando remembers that her family was forced to move from Hood River to one of the California camps in the spring of 1942. She remembers hearing the news at the University and running to the railroad tracks on the edge of Eugene where she saw the train carrying her family to the camp. She remembers the despair, the bitter feelings and the tears.

"Then I was truly a sad and lonely co-ed, feeling wronged

and anguished that the course of my life had been violently disrupted," Ando said.

Graduation that year was held at 8 p.m., which was past curfew. The University made attempts to have the curfew waived so Ando could attend her graduation ceremony, but the requests were denied.

Ando was unaware of the University's efforts, but she wasn't waiting around to find out the results. Fearing she would be sent to the camps, Ando arranged to take her final exams early and boarded a bus for Denver, where she had heard Japanese-Americans were welcome.

She enrolled at the University of Denver, finished graduate school, married, raised 6 children and became an award-winning first grade teacher in Denver, where she still lives and teaches at the age of 65.

Last year, when University Archivist Keith Richard found a

file on Ando's case, he "took the lid off the hornet's nest," as Ando referred to his invitation for her to return for graduation.

"I cannot forget the events of 44 years ago, but I am no longer embittered," Ando said. She accepted the invitation and became a celebrity.

"We surely do not pretend that what we do here today can make up adequately for the wrong that was done in 1942 to Ando, but we can at least tell her of our deep regret at what happened then and of the warmth of our feeling today toward her and her fellow Japanese-Americans," summed up University President Paul Olum in his introduction of Ando.

Ando's return to Eugene was a major media event, drawing reporters from NBC Network News and Fuji Television Network, the largest Japanese network, as well as local, statewide

and regional media representatives.

More than 20 members of Ando's family were able to attend the ceremony last week. Had she taken part in the 1942

commencement, no one in her family — a family that takes great pride in education — would have been allowed to attend and share in her graduation, Olum said.

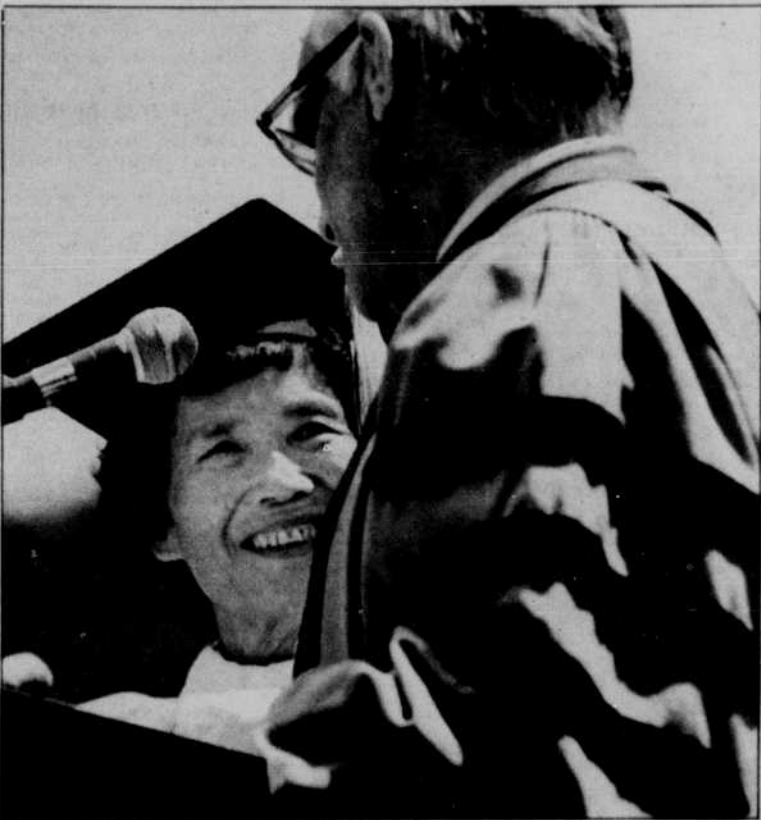


Photo by Ross Martin

Michi Yasui Ando, a Japanese-American who had to leave the University in 1942 to escape internment, finally receives her diploma from University President Paul Olum at commencement exercises June 15.

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