

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Vernonia's Japanese Community and World War II

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From the early 1920s, many people of Japanese ancestry lived in the Vernonia area. The Inouye family owned and operated the Vernonia Laundry. Mary Kato ran a "chop suey" restaurant. The Soejima and Kuge families came to the area in the 1920s as railroad workers in an all-Japanese crew. Their children attended Vernonia schools and were good students who participated in school activities. They had also lived for a few years at Clark and Wilson Camp Eight, one of the several Japanese timber and railroad worker camps.

From the time the Oregon-American mill was built until after WWII, company housing was racially segregated. The O-A "Japanese Colony" was located where Anderson Park is today. In 1927, Oregon-American needed additional rail spurs built in their forest holdings which prompted the establishment of its own railroad construction company. They hired thirty to forty Japanese laborers and housed them in a segregated bunkhouse with its own cookhouse and dining room about a quarter mile from Camp McGregor. The camp foreman and his wife ran the camp with the latter serving as cook and bunkhouse manager.

Following the Japanese Empire's attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, wartime paranoia led the US government to take steps resulting in taking approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and farms on the West Coast to internment camps inland. Sixty-two percent were naturalized American citizens, or Nisei, born in the USA to legal immigrants. Due to racial prejudice in the first part of the twentieth century, many of the first generation immigrants (Issei) had lived as registered aliens for two to four decades because they had been denied the ability to become citizens. Even veterans of World War I were interned.

On May 20, 1942, nineteen Vernonia residents of Japanese ancestry were taken by bus - escorted by two

truckloads of soldiers - to the Portland Livestock Pavilion where they awaited relocation along with others such as the Oregon-American railroad section crew who were similarly removed from their Oregon homes. With little advance notice, they had to abandon or sell at low prices most of their possessions. The May 21st Vernonia Eagle article that reported the removal added "Vernonia citizens who saw them leave felt relieved to think that this possible source of danger was leaving, but with that feeling of relief was mingled regret that some well-known and liked, worthwhile Japanese populace were required to abandon their homes." An unconfirmed rumor at the time circulated that an unknown Japanese person was seen on a remote logging road and was assumed to be secretly communicating with the enemy. At the end of the War, however, not a single American of Japanese origin was found guilty of any kind of treason or espionage; those convicted for the same were all Caucasians.

Among those taken away that May included the Soejima and Kuge families. Several VHS students went to the stockyard - renamed the Portland Assembly Center - the next day to talk with their classmates through the wire fence until a guard forced them to leave. Toshi Kuge had been 1934 VHS Student Body President and was in medical school when the relocation commenced. Roy Soejima, Class of 1941, was an honor student, sophomore class president and active in sports. Ben Soejima, VHS 1942, was on VHS winning teams in football and basketball, and his sister Kerry, also VHS 1942, was in the glee club. They were all Nisei, American-born children of Japanese parents.

The final relocation of the 2,400 Oregon Japanese-Americans detained in Portland to the hastily constructed relocation center in Idaho didn't occur until September. Nisei of fighting age were wanted by the military but were only allowed to join the Army and serve in all-Nisei units. Ben and two of his brothers enlisted while his parents and sister were interned at the Minidoka camp in Idaho. They were assigned to the 442nd Regiment, an all-Nisei unit that fought its way across Europe. Toshi Kuge served as an assistant to the head doctor at the Portland Assembly Center and later helped

treat people in relocation centers. After the war he went on to have a successful medical practice in Portland. Toshi's brother, Tommy, enlisted in the Army and was killed in the war. A few years later, Ben's younger brother, Bryan, also joined the now-desegregated Army and fought in the Korean War.

Over 650 of the Nisei regiment were killed in action and twenty earned the Congressional Medal of Honor in 2000. Although they fought valiantly and earned numerous medals and citations, it has only been in recent years that their part in the victory has been fully recognized. In 2012, along with other surviving members of the 442nd Regiment, Ben Soejima received a Congressional Gold Medal for his service during the war. A 2013 reception at the Oregon Historical Society marked the opening of a new exhibit on the Japanese-American soldiers of World War II. Ben, age 90 at the time, was one of the honorees and wore his medal with pride.

Although his family did not return to Vernonia after the war and his siblings are deceased, Ben returns to Vernonia annually for the Old Grads Picnic and enjoys visiting with his long-ago schoolmates. The Soejima family made a generous donation to the new school's athletic facilities. The boys' locker room coach's office is named in Ben's honor, and he has made additional contributions to Vernonia Education Foundation's Sports Initiative. He also donated a set of Clark and Wilson Lumber camp coins and other Vernonia memorabilia to the museum.

Many of the Japanese-Americans who lived in the camps understood the paranoia that led to their internment and were incredibly gracious, at least in their public communications to others, about their acceptance of the situation. Judd Greenman, General Manager of Oregon-American, communicated with many of the former O-A workers who were in service during the war by sending letters and copies of the Vernonia Eagle. He received a letter from one of the former Japanese rail section gang whom he had known for 31 years that read:

"I do hope you are OK and doing all you can for the good old Uncle Sam every day. It sure was one nightmare to leave dear old Oregon and dear friends to evacuate to this new city of

Minidoka. We hear and read a great deal of the prejudice against the Japanese on the coast. Well we can't very well blame them at this time as there exist too many propaganda. Still we are happy to say we have a big obligation to pay to this country for the happy years we have enjoyed in the past. I am sure there will be good will among every one when the war ends, and I am very happy indeed to have good many real friends on the coast who really trust and remember us. Our gang from Keasey, Oregon, are all in very good spirits and hoping for the day that we can go back to the coast."

From Virgil Powell's Diary

Virgil Powell (1887-1963) was a long-time resident whose family had a farm in the Upper Nehalem Valley between Natl and Pittsburg. Each year from 1906 until 1955, he kept a regular diary of his activities. He made little mention of current world events in his diaries, and there was no mention of Pearl Harbor or other big news from the war years. He did, however, note his purchase of War Bonds in May 1942, and earlier that year he went to work as a fireman at the O-A mill at age 55 when so many of the younger workers had enlisted in the services.

Tuesday, May 26, 1942: Went over town got haircut and purchased \$1325 in bonds. Hauled scrap lumber from mill afternoon. Fair forenoon but rained very hard at times during afternoon.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is open from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding holidays) all year. From June through mid-September, the museum is also open on Fridays from 1 - 4 pm. There is no charge for admission but donations are always welcome. Become a member of the museum for an annual \$5 fee to receive the periodic newsletter. We now have a page on the Vernonia Hands on Art website, www.vernonia-handsonart.org If you are a Facebook user, check out the Vernonia Pioneer Museum page. The museum volunteers are always pleased to enlist additional volunteers to help hold the museum open and assist in other ways. Please stop by and let one of the volunteers know of your interest in helping out.

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