



'FBI: Taken' exhibit resonates with Portland filmmaker

Neil H. Simon's documentary looks inside the daily life of a unique internment camp that was the destination of Portland's Japanese residents

BY LEAH INGRAM
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The Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center is home to the remnants and artifacts of Japanese Americans who lived through the legal arrests and internment camps following the ratification of Executive Order 9066 in February of 1942. The halls of their museum on SW 2nd Avenue shows photographs, maps and life size replicas of the living arrangements at the internment



Neil H. Simon

Legacy Center to shed light on these obscure arrests and the following years of internment in the "special" camp in Santa Fe through his new documentary "Prisoners and Patriots: The Untold Story of Japanese American Internment in Santa Fe, New Mexico."

Simon's documentary depicts the confusion and feelings of helplessness which Japanese Americans faced after the sudden arrests, as described through interviews with former detainees and their children. The arrests were swift and without warning, but illustrated an element of premeditation on the part of the U.S. government. The Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center reveals that President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to the Chief of Naval Operations in 1936 "that every Japanese citizen or non-citizen on the Island of O'ahu who meets these Japanese ships ... should be secretly but definitely identified and his or her name be placed on a special list of those who would be the first to be placed in a concentration camp in the event of trouble."

Former detainees express exasperation at the hitherto unspoken caveats of citizenship as they were forced to undergo loyalty tests and sham trials. Many of the men who were arrested had sons in the American Armed Forces, and yet, when these soldiers visited their fathers, they were allowed to converse only in the presence of armed guards. Simon's documentary explores the daily life inside the internment camps as well as the intricacies of what it meant to be a citizen as well as an immigrant during World War II.

Leah Ingram: *The only remaining physical indication of the Santa Fe camp is a small memorial marker in the middle of what is now a housing development. Do you believe that the camps have largely been forgotten? What do you hope to achieve through renewed attention to these camps?*

Neil H. Simon: This film is being produced so that we always remember the type of discrimination our Japanese and

Japanese-American friends and neighbors faced during World War II. I hope recalling the story of the war time hysteria and the creation of the Santa Fe Internment Camp will give viewers pause to think about how they can work to encourage policies and actions that promote tolerance and drive our country away from repeating any practice like that aimed at the Japanese in the 1940s.

L.I.: *Your film shows an emphasis on the good treatment that the detainees received in the Santa Fe camp. Why was this the case and why did you highlight it in your film?*

N.S.: "Prisoners and Patriots" reflects the true story of what happened in Santa Fe, as told to me through first-hand accounts and as recorded in family letters and previously unpublished documents. My original research and interviews show that the day-to-day experience in the camp was diverse. There was censorship. There were sometimes overly stern and racist guards. But there were also a lot of routine good times that included Japanese cultural activities, sports and other recreation. It would be dishonest to make a film about the Santa Fe Camp and exclude these memories relayed from the men who were imprisoned there.

L.I.: *State Representatives were insistent on endorsing Executive Order 9066 (which stated all Japanese immigrants and citizens must report to officials for detainment). This law was not passed until Feb. 19, whereas the FBI arrests began the very night of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. What was the public reaction to these early arrests?*

N.S.: The public reaction to the FBI arrests that occurred on Dec. 7, 1941 or shortly thereafter was by and large supportive of the government action. The United States was at war with Japan, and the government targeted men for arrest who had either dealt directly with Japanese embassy officials, worked for Japanese embassy officials or were in positions of perceived power from where they could exercise any loyalty to Japan. Therefore, the Japanese had precious few people standing up for them in 1941 amid the rush to judgment that found them confined in jails and later Department of Justice-run camps, like Santa Fe.

L.I.: *Do you think that public opinion concerning the rights of immigrants has shifted since World War II or that the Japanese internment camps have swayed public practice concerning immigrants either positively or negatively?*

N.S.: Considering the loss of life our country suffered on December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001, we as a nation have an extremely sensitive balancing act to perform when it comes to protecting our security and protecting the civil rights and human rights of our people.

Thankfully, the government does seem to



PHOTO COURTESY OF LACY SATO, THE OREGONIAN AND THE OREGON NIKKEI LEGACY CENTER
Japanese American community leader Sadiji Shiogi is lead away by FBI the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Top left, a composite of three photos showing the Santa Fe camp. Photo Courtesy Prisoners and Patriots

Matsujiro Otani, while imprisoned in the Santa Fe Internment Camp, is visited by his son, Akira Otani, home on leave from the U.S. Army.

COURTESY PRISONERS AND PATRIOTS/SATANI FAMILY PHOTO

have learned some lessons from the xenophobic roundup of Japanese-Americans and Japanese nationals during World War II. Such an incarceration has not been repeated. However, sometimes our policies have been overtaken by a hysteria that has had the similar result of marginalizing peaceful people simply because of their minority backgrounds. When a Muslim woman is arrested for praying alongside a highway or a Sikh is pulled over for wearing a turban on his head, we are reminded of the tremendous work we still need to do to promote a society of greater tolerance.

L.I.: *Prisoners and Patriots focuses on the internment camps in New Mexico, yet you chose to hold its premiere in Oregon. What affected your choice to show your film in Portland?*

N.S.: Portland is my hometown. My friends of all backgrounds who I grew up with here shaped my views of the world and how we all relate with one another, regardless of our backgrounds. While researching our country's history of internment I could not help but think had I been born a few decades earlier, I would have had to see my own friends taken away simply because of the birthplace of their parents. The Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center and its leadership in holding groundbreaking events like this screening, and focusing attention on a range of issues surrounding the Japanese-American experience, seemed like the perfect partnership and platform for the premier of this film. Considering so many men were arrested in Oregon, including the eventual head doctor of the Santa Fe Internment Camp, I'm glad to see this movie get its first audience on the West Coast.

L.I.: *What lessons can viewers of your film*



take away for modern immigration issues and debates?

N.S.: The story of internment goes well beyond immigration. It is a question of how we treat minorities in our own nation who look like our enemies from abroad. If someone sees in this film the fathers behind barbed wire being visited by their own sons in U.S. military uniforms, I hope they will think there are better ways for us to defend our nation than conducting mass-round ups based on religious practice or skin color. In short, I hope students and young people will see our own history and know this is a course of action we never want to repeat.

I also hope viewers will find their own meaning and own lessons from our shared history. If someone hears a former internee talk about why he remained an optimistic person even after all the U.S. government took from him, I hope the viewer will find reason to be positive in the face of adversity as well.

To learn more about this and other exhibits at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, visit www.oregonnikkei.org

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