

Minoru Yasui awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom

Minoru “Min” Yasui (1916-1986) received a posthumous 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom — the highest civilian award in the United States — from President Barack Obama on November 24. Yasui, the first Japanese-American attorney in Oregon, is known for his courageous stand against military orders that resulted in the forced removal and imprisonment of more than 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry during World War II, but his entire life was committed to the defense of human and civil rights as well as justice for all.

Yasui worked tirelessly on behalf of countless marginalized groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, children and youth, the elderly, and the economically disadvantaged. A lifelong member of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), he served as chair of the National Redress Committee and devoted the last years of his life to that movement.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom nomination effort was led by the co-founders of the Min Yasui Tribute (MYT) Project: Yasui’s daughter, Holly Yasui, and Peggy Nagae, the lead attorney for Min Yasui’s *coram nobis* case. The nomination was made by U.S. senator Mazie Hirono of Hawai’i. The submission included endorsements from more than 115 elected officials; national, state and regional organizations; nine U.S. senators and 26 U.S. representatives from 11 states; governors, attorneys general, mayors, and state legislators; leading national civil-rights organizations; 46 regional and state organizations and individuals; and notable individuals, such as two members of the president’s cabinet.

With the awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Minoru Yasui, Obama completed the recognition of all three plaintiffs in the Japanese-American internment cases. Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 and 2012, respectively. The three landmark cases were reopened in 1983 under a writ of *coram nobis* when researchers discovered evidence that the government knowingly presented false information to the U.S. Supreme Court. The cases were a critical component of the Japanese American Redress movement.

According to The Oregon Encyclopedia, the encyclopedic resource of the Oregon Historical Society (OHS), which is located online at <www.oregonencyclopedia.org>, “Minoru Yasui was born in Hood River on October 16, 1916, the third son of Japanese immigrants Shidzuyo and Masuo Yasui. In 1939, Yasui became the first Japanese American to graduate from the University



Photo courtesy of the Yasui family

A LASTING LEGACY. Minoru “Min” Yasui (left photo) received a posthumous 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom — the highest civilian award in the United States — from President Barack Obama on November 24. Yasui, the first Japanese-American attorney in Oregon, is known for his courageous stand against military orders that resulted in the forced removal and imprisonment of more than 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry during World War II, but his entire life was committed to the defense of human and civil rights as well as justice for all. Yasui was born in Hood River, Oregon on October 16, 1916. Pictured at right is the Yasui Brothers store in Hood River.

of Oregon School of Law and the first Japanese-American member of the Oregon Bar. He made national history by challenging the constitutionality of the military curfew imposed on Japanese-American citizens in World War II.” A full biography, authored by Nagae, is found online at <<http://bit.ly/1SWdN4Q>>.

OHS also contains extensive manuscripts and artifacts from Minoru Yasui and the Yasui family in its collections, some of which are currently on display at the museum. There are more than 1,200 three-dimensional artifacts in the collection, the majority of which come from the Yasui Brothers Store, such as crates, signs, and merchandise. Several of the items are on view in OHS’s permanent exhibit, “Oregon My Oregon,” which has a replica of the 1940s era storefront of the Hood River business. Other items were part of a recent display, “World War II: A World at War, A State Transformed,” which closed this month. Artifacts have also been loaned to the JICA Emigration Center in Yokohama, Japan.

The OHS research library has a large manuscript collection from the family’s Hood River operations, the Yasui Brothers Company records (OHS Library, Mss 2949), which is accessible via an online catalog found at <<http://bit.ly/1N9mV7h>>.

The Oregon Nikkei Endowment (O.N.E.) is serving as fiscal sponsor for the Minoru Yasui Tribute Committee and was part of the committee that worked on his nomination for the Presidential Medal of Freedom. According to O.N.E. executive director Lynn Fuchigami Longfellow, “We are inspired by Minoru Yasui’s ideals and accomplishments and are dedicated to



Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society

continue his work for civil rights and the protection of our civil liberties.”

The tribute committee is planning a travelling exhibit and symposium as well as the debut of the documentary *Never Give Up! The Story of Minoru Yasui*, all of which will open next year — in 2016, when Min would have turned 100 years old. O.N.E. is also working on a school curriculum with Hood River Middle School teacher Sarah Segal in addition to a memorial exhibit that will be inaugurated at the Portland Minoru Yasui Centennial Celebration next year.

“Min is indeed a true American hero — a most worthy and ideal candidate to posthumously receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom,” Longfellow said. “It’s

wonderful to see him recognized for his lasting contributions and significant public endeavors. But the most fitting tribute to Min is to continue his life’s work to promote and defend civil and human rights for all Americans. The issues of civil liberties and national security that he raised are just as relevant today as in 1942. His effort to promote empowerment and respect for diversity and a multicultural society are just as critical now as ever.”

To learn more about, or to contribute to, next year’s centennial celebration and film release, please visit <www.minoruyasuitribute.org> or <www.minoruyasui.film.org>.

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