

# The Fading History of Japanese American Concentration Camps, According to a Survivor

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this piece for Dr. Miller's UWP 104C (Journalism) course. The assignment was to profile someone we had never met before that would be interesting to a large audience. As someone whose family was incarcerated in Japanese American concentration camps during World War II and cognizant of its historical relevance today, I wanted to focus my profile on someone who had been subjected to the same thing, and more specifically, had been imprisoned at Tule Lake. Incarceration at Tule Lake is often under-explored in historical narratives and research due to the stigma of "disloyalty" attached to the No-No boys who were specifically held there; this issue divides the Japanese American community to this day. Interviewing Toshiko Shimada and bringing light to her story was an immense privilege, as the number of people who can talk about their experiences in the concentration camps is diminishing as time goes on.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: "The same thing is happening over again," says the complex subject near the end of Krista's superb profile essay. Up until this point, the disturbing parallel between past and present has only been implied. Krista lets Mrs. Shimada make the point herself, just before she turns away and concludes her remarks with a mixture of barely suppressed fury and a survivor's poignant solitude. This powerful ending—one of the most effective I've encountered as a teacher—has been prepared for by Krista's close observation and superbly modulated structure. A strong profile needs to impress readers with the particularity of its subject while developing a theme*

*that will connect with the reader's own experience. Already, I've used Krista's essay as a model and, in it, my students have found inspiration for their own work.*

—Gregory Miller, University Writing Program

Toshiko Shimada regarded me with a raised eyebrow, scanning me up and down as she sat with her back ramrod straight in her armchair. Her hair was like a white, fluffy halo around a deeply tanned, wrinkled face. I had the sudden feeling she knew all of my deepest, darkest fears just by looking at me.

When she spotted the cookies in my hands, she smiled, her eyes squinting.

“You can call me Auntie,” Mrs. Shimada said, her voice warbling and soft. “I see your mama taught you to always bring *omiyage*.”

It's true. I always shove no less than twelve pounds of miscellaneous goodies from Trader Joe's into my suitcase to bring as gifts whenever I visit family or friends in Hawai'i or Japan.

She grinned, popped a shortbread cookie in her mouth, and slowly but surely pushed herself out of her armchair, refusing any help with a dismissive wave. “We'll go in the garden,” she said.

Her garden is meticulous—rows of geraniums, cycads and roses lined up like soldiers, along with neatly pruned persimmon, apple and mandarin trees. It had just begun to get colder, so there weren't many vegetables to be found. But a stubborn volunteer cherry tomato plant is still going strong.

“Tomatoes. They follow me everywhere,” said Mrs. Shimada. “Want to take some home?”

She left no room for argument when she handed me a container to put tomatoes in, and turned to the persimmon tree before I could say no, a pair of clippers in hand like a crab with pincers raised.

Toshiko Shimada was born in 1925, and her childhood was spent moving back and forth from Clarksburg and Courtland, two unincorporated, tiny farming towns on the outskirts of Sacramento and along the Sacramento River. Her father had immigrated from Yamaguchi Prefecture in Japan to the United States, and due to the Alien Land Law of 1913 and naturalization laws that prohibited non-white immigrants from becoming U.S. citizens, he was unable to lease land. As a result,

the Shimadas and many other Japanese American farmers were forced to lease under other people's names, and move every time they wanted to plant a new crop.

"We couldn't stay in the same place, and I bounced back and forth between segregated schools. But Dad grew tomatoes, always tomatoes," she said. "That was probably the one constant."

Only able afford to farm small plots of land, they "lived harvest to harvest." Despite that, her parents did not want her to work in the fields.

"They made sure I went to normal school, and Holland Union Gakuen [the local Japanese school]. Drove me and my brothers every day, even though it was 13 miles away," Mrs. Shimada said. "Hated it at the time, since it cut into summer vacation. But I missed it a lot during the war. Loved public speaking, and learning."

Hoarsely she added, "Would have loved to have gone to college."

But as Mrs. Shimada got older, she began to resent her parents for making her go to Gakuen, and for speaking Japanese in public.

"We had to go grocery shopping in Sacramento because there's nothing in Courtland or Clarksburg, and when my parents spoke in Japanese, we would always get dirty looks from the *hakujin* [white people]. It got even worse when the war started," she said.

At this point, Mrs. Shimada had collected a formidable amount of Hachiya persimmons. "These *kaki* [persimmons] are going home with you," she said, and raised her eyebrow, as if daring me to disagree with her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Shimada, but I don't think I need that many," I said. She maintained eye contact with me as she placed another persimmon on the pile.

"Call me Auntie, remember?" she corrected me. "Dry them, and you'll have plenty of space. Haven't you ever had *hoshigaki*?" she said, referring to a specific variety of dried persimmon that just so happens to dictate an incredibly labor-intensive process of peeling, hanging, and quite literally massaging the fruit every day, while maintaining the perfect humidity, until a coating of sugar forms on the outside. My grandmother absolutely hated making them.

"You'll need more *kaki*," said Mrs. Shimada resolutely. Yet another acorn-shaped persimmon was added to the heap. "Can't get that at the grocery store. Anyways, what was I saying?"

She was 16 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December

7, 1941.

“I was in my P.E. class when I got the news. The Koyasako girls lived right behind the school, and they came running out, saying the war had started.” She paused. “I didn’t think anything would happen to us at first. I thought, ‘I’m an American, it’ll be fine,’” Mrs. Shimada said.

The next day, her Japanese American teachers, neighbors, and community leaders were arrested by the F.B.I. When she opened *The Sacramento Bee*, it featured a guide on how to tell the difference between “the Japs and the Chinese,” in which Japanese people were described as “squat mongoloids with a flat, blob nose.” Her Chinese classmates began to wear pins that read, “I am Chinese” and to fly the flag of the Republic of China out of fear of mistaken targeted racial violence at the hands of white citizens.

“There was nowhere to hide,” she said simply, and climbed down from her ladder. “But I never should have needed to.”

She slowly knelt down to start weeding, some unnamed joints making ominous popping noises, and a part of me was afraid that her tiny 93-year-old body was going to fall apart and turn into dust.

On February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 with the purpose of “every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage.” E.O. 9066 gave the War Department the authority to divide the West Coast into military areas, and incarcerate over 120,000 Japanese Americans, the overwhelming majority of which were birthright American citizens, in concentration camps.

“It was one of the biggest civil rights violations in U.S. history, and Japanese Americans were essentially told to just grin and bear it even when everything was taken away from them,” said Professor Cecilia Tsu, a history professor at UC Davis who specializes in Asian American history.

The Shimadas were told to only bring what they could carry, and were shipped to the Marysville Assembly Center, where they were kept for a month.

“Marysville wasn’t that bad compared to what some of my friends down south had to go through. They had to live in horse stables,” said Mrs. Shimada, flinging some more errant weeds in my general direction.

After that, they were incarcerated at Tule Lake, a concentration camp close to the California-Oregon border. They had no idea what Tule Lake was going to be like, or how long they would be there.

“I guess in some ways, it might have been safer than being on the

outside, you know? But it didn't feel like protection, since we were fenced in with barbed wire, and the guards always had their guns pointed at us," said Mrs. Shimada. "No matter what they called it—relocation, or whatever—it was prison."

Her tone was nonchalant, but her words were underlined with poorly concealed fury as she ripped out more bluegrass and broadleaf plantain with a little more vigor than before, and flung the interlopers in the direction of the steadily growing pile. She overshot, so I got up to put them back in the pile.

Mrs. Shimada gave me a quick, forced smile in return.

"I don't have a lot of specific memories of Tule Lake anymore. I just remember how cold it was." She turned fully toward me, and laughed out loud, her whole face wrinkling in delight. "But there was one time it was so cold the sewage line burst, and it froze into a pond. The next day, people were ice skating on it."

Tule Lake was different from the other Japanese American concentration camps, as No-No boys were incarcerated there. In the winter of 1943, the U.S. government distributed and required all incarcerated to answer a loyalty questionnaire. Questions 27 and 28 asked if they would be willing to serve in combat duty, and if they would give up loyalty to the Japanese emperor and swear allegiance to the U.S. No-No boys either answered "no" to both questions or refused to answer, and as a result, No-No boys were branded as disloyal and segregated at Tule Lake—a stigma that still divides the Japanese American community today.

"It's bullshit," said Mrs. Shimada suddenly. "I grew up in Clarksburg farming tomatoes, what do I care about the emperor of Japan?" She gave me a mischievous look. "My cousin flushed their questionnaire down the toilet."

Mrs. Shimada found it difficult to talk about her experiences at Tule Lake with her late husband as they ran their farm where they grew—you guessed it—tomatoes. While she was incarcerated at Tule Lake, he was part of the all-Japanese American, segregated 442nd Infantry Regiment. They often argued about what made "patriotic" behavior—her husband thought that fighting and giving his life for the U.S. was patriotic, and believed that speaking out against the government would do nothing. On the other hand, Mrs. Shimada considered dissent within the camps to be patriotic.

"Lots of screaming matches before I decided it was better to be

quiet,” she said.

However, after the death of her husband and the unexpected passing of her oldest son, Steven, due to a heart attack, she found it more pressing than before to open up about her experiences at Tule Lake and pass on her knowledge before it was too late. She began to share her story with her kids, her local Japanese American Citizens League chapter in Florin, and (her favorite) the local gardening club.

But now, she sees no point. Once an avid reader of the news, she no longer wants to consume any news media. The community that can relate to her concentration camp experience has shrunk every year, since historically Japanese American farms in the Delta area are being bought out by vineyards, forcing them to move elsewhere, while the majority of the incarcerated are now either dead or dying.

“Look at the Muslim ban, the camps they put immigrant kids in. They never listened, or cared in the first place. They didn’t even think we were American. The same thing is happening over again,” said Mrs. Shimada. “I can’t keep reliving it. My blood pressure is already high.”

“The nation’s forgetting. I’m forgetting.” She paused, and turned her head away. “Sometimes, I think it’s a good thing I’m forgetting.”