

Caretakers of the Past

by Dianne Fukami

When I was in my teens, my last surviving grandparent died. Supposedly Ojii-san drove a mean motorcycle down the hills of San Francisco in his youth and even had long hair. But I only remember him as an old man. Slightly stooped, wearing glasses, he had a gray crewcut and wore a vest even during Stockton's blazing summer heat.

He was born in 1893 and came to this country at age 18. He farmed, operated a fish market, had one daughter die in infancy, lost his possessions during internment, operated a residential hotel after Camp, and loved Obaasan with a tenderness that was unusual for that generation. But I never talked with him about any of that. By the time I was old enough to be interested, he was gone.

Today there are very few Issei left and unfortunately, even the number of Nisei is decreasing everyday. So it's not just that our grandparents and parents are dying off, but our very history is fading away too.

In the past few years, it's been my pleasure to have produced a trilogy of documentaries for KCSM-TV on the Japanese American experience. The first one, *Chrysanthemums and*

Salt chronicled the Issei immigration to the San Francisco Peninsula and the contributions they made in the floral and salt industries. One of the

was like to be a young boy at the time of the Pearl Harbor bombing. After the camera was turned off and the lights were taken down he said to

me wistfully, "I wish my own kids had asked me the kinds of questions you asked me." It seems that he was willing to share his memories, but his children had never taken the time to ask, or perhaps they thought they would have all the time in the world to hear their father's story.

While interviewing people for *Tanforan: From Race Track to Assembly Center*, I met a Nisei woman, who to this day, has never gone near the old assembly

center site. She didn't even know that a shopping center had been built there. Seeing the pain that those Tanforan memories caused her more than 50 years later, made a powerful



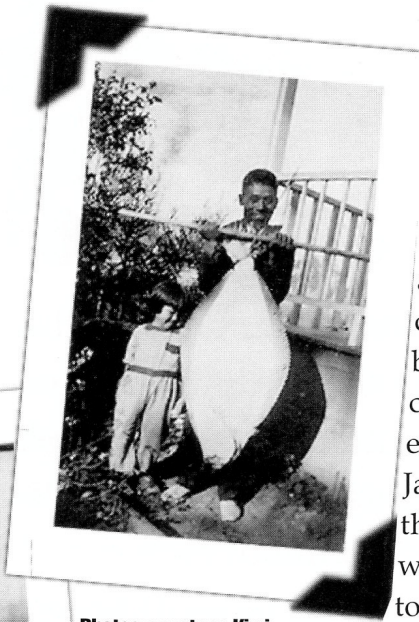
photo courtesy Caryl Ito., NJAHS Archives

most poignant moments came soon after I had finished interviewing a man my father's age. I had just finished asking him about his pre-war experiences and about what it

impression on anybody who watched the documentary, regardless of whether one was of Japanese descent or not. There is no way that a statement like “even today the memory of Tanforan is painful to many of the internees” can compare with the emotion of watching a former internee cry about the loss of freedom she experienced in an assembly center.

It was also while “Tanforan” was in production that a man I had interviewed, suddenly died in a freak car accident. But because of the videotape, I had nearly an hour of his thoughts, impressions, and his version of the “quickie” wedding ceremony that he and his wife had so that they could be assured of being together during the War. The videotape served as a way to preserve his history and to add his voice to the many experiences that make up our collective Japanese American history.

You might be asking yourself, “so what” or “why is it so important?” Someone asked me why I spend so much of my time documenting the Asian American experience. I do it for my children and the younger generation of Yonsei and Gosei, many of whom have just traces of Japanese blood in them now. Since my husband is also a Sansei, my daughters have typical Japanese features, and most Americans are seen as “Asians” first and as Americans second. They need to be proud of their heritage and understand and appreciate the



Photos courtesy Kimi Kodani-Hill, NJAHS Archives

“ I do it for my children and the younger generation of Yonsei and Gosei... I want them to understand their cultural history so that they’re never ashamed of being Japanese American... I hope they learn that intolerance and racism in any form are unacceptable...”

struggle that their great-grandparents went through. I want them to know that there was a time in this country when people were called “Japs” regularly and mistreated solely because of appearances. I want my daughters to understand the big mistake this country committed by ordering the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans. I want them to understand what it was like to lose everything and to have to start all over again when the War was over. I want them to appreciate the hardships that the Issei and Nisei went through to re-establish themselves and their dignity after the War. But most importantly, I want them to understand their cultural history so that they’re never ashamed of being Japanese American. It is especially because they are Japanese American that I hope they learn that intolerance and racism in any form are unacceptable and that they should appreciate and empathize with the immigrants of the 1990s.

Another reason why it’s important to preserve our history is so that non-Japanese can learn about the contributions of the Issei, Nisei, and Sansei to American history and appreciate the diversity we bring to this country. People are slowly beginning to comprehend that “American History” is not necessarily Eurocentric or Caucasian-based.

At a recent talk I was giving, a family friend came up to me after almost everyone had left and said, “I

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