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Starting from Loomis



There were over 150 Japanese families living in Loomis; it was a large community for such a small town. In the schools, too, there were a lot of Japanese kids. I started school in 1928; we were living in the country, so I rode the bus the school provided. I spoke only Japanese then; what little English I knew I picked up during the few miserable months I spent in kindergarten.

Reading was daunting. Father helped me every night through the first two readers, laboriously sounding out the words in a heavy accent. With the third reader he threw up his hands and told me I was on my own.

I believe we Japanese children were segregated or tracked at public school. We were so happy in our school that I didn't realize we had this odd arrangement until recently. From the fifth through eighth grades I had the same teacher and the same classmates, plus or minus a few. "Mrs. Land was promoted too," we said of our teacher, who followed us every year. In our grade there were two classes or sections—one made up of Caucasian children of ranch owners, storekeepers, officials, and other prominent persons and a sprinkling of Japanese. I don't know how the Japanese were chosen for that class; I suppose they were considered better students, though some of us in the other class made higher scores on tests.

Our class consisted of Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and poor white kids, some of whom came to school barefoot. It was during the Depression, though we Japanese always wore clean and decent clothes—which meant no patches. Once after school, when I was home and had changed my clothes, I had on a pair of overalls with patches on my seat. A boy who was at our house called me “patch-ass.” I remember how hurtful and humiliating that was.

I guess we were the “B” class. Mrs. Land, bless her, kept harping on our grammar and “pidgin English,” so much so that we all learned to speak correctly, at least in her presence. Some of those who were picked on a lot said Mrs. Land didn’t like Japanese. I don’t think that was the case; I thought she was a good teacher, really concerned for us.

I wasn’t called on much, which was lucky because I didn’t always know the answers—I just pretended that I did. Even so, on my report card Mrs. Land wrote tersely, “he is intelligent and sensitive.”



Most of the Japanese who lived in Loomis were farmers. A few owned their farms; they had bought them before the 1913 Alien Land Law was enacted, which forbade the ownership of land by Issei (first-generation Japanese). After 1913, some bought land in the name of their citizen children to get around this law. But most Japanese leased the farms or sharecropped.

From the time I was a child, around ten or eleven, I was out in the orchard picking fruit—plums, peaches, and pears—in the summer. I remember when I first started I was paid fifty cents a day. It was kid’s pay, though I think I was doing an adult’s work.

When I was paid at the end of the summer, I was called to Mr. Okusu’s office, which consisted of a simple roll-top desk with piles of papers and accounting books and a chair in the corner of the parlor. As he handed me the check he said, “You worked hard for this, now

spend it wisely,” and I said, “*Hai* (yes), thank you,” with, of course, a bow. I don’t remember the amount of the check, but to me it seemed a princely sum. In fact, I had never had a check in my name, much less for such an amount.



We got along with the Caucasian kids at school and in the neighborhood as long as we remembered our place. We were the Japanese kids whose parents worked the farms, who lived in shacks, took *furo* (Japanese baths), and only wore *zori* (flip-flops) inside the house and to and from the bathhouse; we ate fish, rice, tofu, sushi, and other weird things.

I had a few white friends, but we were never very close. I don’t remember ever going inside a *hakujin* (Caucasian) home, and I don’t remember them coming to our house. When we had the store in town, a few came to shop, especially in the late spring or summer when Mama sold snow cones. I wonder if it was in response to the ad a fellow student (I think a girl from the eighth grade) had solicited and put in the school newsletter—“Get Mama’s Snowcones at Loomis Fish Market.” That was definitely a good time for the store and a busy time for Mother.



In 1941, the family was sharecropping a ranch in Penryn, a small but active town about three miles from Loomis. Father had already gone to the sanatorium because of his tuberculosis, so Mother was the head of the household and had to make the difficult decisions. Mother was around thirty-eight at the time; I know she wasn’t quite forty. The running joke later was that she was never forty, always claiming to be thirty-nine (she was like Jack Benny in that respect).

I had recently returned from Los Angeles. My parents were fearful

that I would catch my father's TB since I had lung issues as a child, so they sent me to Los Angeles to finish my last year of high school. I was back with my family again and, along with my mother and younger brother and sister, doing all I could to help the family make ends meet.

The small twenty-acre ranch where we lived was our main source of income. We were allowed a monthly advance of fifty dollars on the crop to live on. This was hardly enough, and we had to supplement it with our savings or what we earned working at other ranches in the summer. After our harvest in late August, we went to pick grapes in Lodi, a town about forty miles away, living in a labor camp for two months. We would come home with a tidy sum that would see us through the winter months.

We had a flock of New Hampshire chickens we had raised from day-old chicks. The roosters were butchered on special occasions, and the hens provided a plentiful supply of eggs; the surplus we bartered for groceries. Mother's vegetable garden was a source of fresh vegetables throughout the year.

Togan (Chinese winter melon) grew abundantly. The greenish-gray melons looked like huge stones in the garden. Togan soup was our comfort food. I suppose it was a Japanese version of a Chinese dish. I make it now, trying to duplicate Mother's soup—the distinctive taste and smell of togan mixed with pork, dried shrimp, and shiitake mushrooms. I love it. It takes me back to those early days when my mother, like other resourceful Issei mothers, accomplished so much with so little. Togan soup—so warming and filling and good. I remember how happy it made me; I would have it every day if my wife would allow it.

After the fruit harvest, after all the expenses had been deducted, we shared the net income 60/40—60 percent for the owner and 40 percent for us, less the advance we had already spent during the year. Some years we made a few hundred dollars, but I don't remember ever making over \$500.

At the time of the evacuation order, Executive Order 9066, we had

been working since the end of the previous season; and we left for camp in May 1942, which was before the harvest. This meant that, except for the monthly advances, we were not fully compensated for the days we had worked—Mother, my brother, and me, who worked after school and on weekends.

When we were about to leave for camp, the boss asked us, “Are you okay? Is it okay?” He probably would have given us some of our wages if we had asked, but we didn’t know at the time that it was within our right, so we told him we would be okay—we lost most of our season’s wages that year. He did give us fifty dollars for leaving our pickup truck with him. He was a kind man, thoughtful and sweet. He used to bring us the *Sacramento Bee* every night after he and his family were through with it.

We said goodbye to the boss and transported ourselves on the pickup to Loomis, three miles away. The fruit house was the gathering place from where we boarded a bus to Arboga Assembly Center near Marysville, about ten miles away. After unloading our suitcases and duffle bags I drove the pickup to the Ford garage in town, where I left it for the boss by previous arrangement. Then I went to join my family and face the unknown future of life in camp.



I once wrote a poem that stated that on December 7, 1941, when I heard the radio report that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor, I, a Japanese American, was chopping wood left-handed. I’m not sure what I was trying to say. It’s true that I’m a natural born “lefty,” partly converted by my parents to be a “righty,” as was customary at the time. To this day I often feel an ache, a frustration, in one hand over the other, as if one side of me is always neglected or ignored while the other is in use.

Perhaps in the poem I was trying to relate this feeling to my reaction to the devastating news. Of course, my first reaction was shock

and disbelief. Soon after, though, I wondered what would happen to us Japanese Americans. Who are we? How are we perceived by others? What will happen now that war has begun?

My younger brother and sister were attending Placer Union High School, riding the school bus from Penryn to Auburn, a distance of seven miles. Though the situation was awkward, they didn't report anything unpleasant happening after Pearl Harbor. Most of the teachers were fair, telling the students that we were Americans like everyone else.

However, some teachers could barely contain their hate and prejudice, including my public speaking teacher who I thought had been my favorite. I understand that as soon as the Japanese were gone, she was active in a committee to keep the "Japs" from returning to Auburn. When I was in Arboga, I remember writing to her for advice on forming a drama club, and I never heard from her. I was certainly wrong about her.

The *Nichi Bei* newspaper was our primary and most reliable source of information. *Nichi Bei* provided an invaluable service to our community during those trying days until the very last day it was permitted to publish. Other metropolitan papers and radio stations were unreliable, filled with sensational and alarming reports—war hysteria was in the air.

As we prepared to leave for camp, Mother made two rather large duffle bags, sewing them by hand because the canvas material was too thick for her treadle sewing machine. The material was cut from the tent my father had put up when he tried to isolate himself in the pasture because of his TB. It was amazing how much those bags could hold. We were able to take far more than what would fit in an average suitcase. I still have one of the bags somewhere. It's a reminder not only of how resourceful Mother was but also of all Father was willing to sacrifice for us.



We first went by bus to Arboga Assembly Center. Barracks had been hastily built on what had been a pasture—swamp land—which had been leveled by a bulldozer. The mosquitoes and gnats were vicious, especially with the women, feeding on their exposed arms and legs. I think this was when they took to wearing slacks—not as a fashion statement but as a survival mechanism.

Our quarters in the tarpapered barrack consisted of a single room with four US Army cots, mattresses, and blankets. The partitions on both sides of the room did not go to the top, so we could hear everything going on in the rest of the barrack. Of course, whatever we said or did could also be heard by the others. But I found the cot fairly comfortable and slept well enough at night.

For our meals, we lined up with our tin plates. God, how I hate food heaped on tin plates and those tables with built-in benches. Even now at picnics I dislike those tables. The food, though plentiful, was poorly prepared by well-intentioned but amateur cooks. Despite their white aprons and chef's hats, they fooled no one; they were still former farmers, students, insurance agents, fruit pickers, fishermen, and janitors—hardly cooks.

Camp was a great equalizer. Everyone, no matter what his or her background or previous position in society, was reduced to a number. It was possible to go to the shower room and run into the former president of the Japanese Association or the priest from the temple or Mr. Sasaki, the boss and owner of a sixty-acre ranch who always wore a straw hat on a summer Sunday. Without their clothes on, it was almost possible not to recognize them. In fact, that is what we all sought, anonymity, especially in the shower room.

What was most outrageous was going to the latrine, a public outhouse with accommodations for eight or so without partitions. We sat there cheek-to-cheek, so to speak. An often-heard remark was *erai toko*

de aimasu, nah. I don't know how to translate this properly; perhaps "what a horrible place to meet" or "what a miserable situation" . . . something like that.

I was quite active at Arboga. I had been out of high school for almost two years, anxiously waiting for my brother to graduate so I could go on to college. He was to have graduated in June, but he didn't quite make it as we were ordered to go in May. Freed from the drudgery of farm work, I found life in Arboga fascinating and challenging; there were so many new people.

I threw myself into the various activities of camp life. I attended meetings of every kind, participated actively, and volunteered for almost everything. Soon I was working as an orderly at the hospital and writing for the camp newspaper, pursuing areas of interest to me. Most Nisei with any ambition hoped to become medical doctors who would serve their own people, and I was no exception; that seemed to be the only profession open to Japanese Americans. I also liked to write, even though I knew it was an impractical pursuit. I think my father was rather pleased with my writing interest as he was an inveterate letter writer and reader himself.

Letter writing was the only contact we would have with Father from that point on. We spent May to August 1942 at Arboga, until the end of the harvest. Even though it meant packing and moving again, we were glad when the order came to transfer to a more permanent camp at Tule Lake.



On the train trip to Tule Lake I was assigned to be monitor of our car, responsible for about thirty passengers, as a result of my active life at Arboga. It was an easy assignment; the shades were drawn, our movements were restricted, and there was very little interaction among the people. They sat quietly, grimly, preoccupied with their thoughts, try-

ing to endure the discomfort of the ancient train—the cobwebs overhead and the hard wooden benches. It was a long trip, a long night, and none of us slept much. At the designated time I distributed sandwiches and milk to the people, some of whom weren't interested in eating. There was baby food for mothers with infants.

When we arrived at Tule Lake in the morning, we were welcomed by a man who claimed to be our block manager. Though he was a stranger whom we later thought was a bit officious, it was nice to have someone greet us when we arrived at this desolate, strange place near the northern border of California. "If you need anything, just ask me," he said. He provided us with mattresses and US Army blankets; we unpacked and settled in.

After the miserable experience in Arboga, we were excited about the flush toilets in the latrines; in fact, we made a special trip to the latrine to check them out—two rows of porcelain toilets that actually flushed. We tried them several times to see if they really worked; they did. However, the lack of partitions between the toilets and the trough urinals was disconcerting.

One of the first things I did was look for work. I took the most available job as a carpenter's helper, putting up sheetrock in the apartments. I joined a motley crew of five or six men of disparate ages. I believe I was the youngest among them. Except for the crew chief, none of us had any experience in carpentry, barely able to hit a nail straight, but we were welcomed everywhere as *daiku-san* (carpenters). People moved out all their furniture—cots, crude tables and chairs, hastily made from scrap lumber—and waited for us. We were served sodas and refreshments and treated rather royally, which to me was embarrassing as I thought we didn't deserve it. We were just doing a job, making the quarters more livable, finishing what the government had failed to do.



A typical day in camp would begin with the mess bell for breakfast. Getting up was routine, but breakfast, which was usually hotcakes—not my favorite, especially when they were served cold on metal platters—was not much of an inducement. I had never liked the alternative, cereals, dry or cooked, so I often skipped breakfast.

I had worked as a “schoolboy,” or houseboy, in Los Angeles and acquired a taste for lamb and mutton, which was fortunate as lamb or mutton stew was a dish Nihonjin (Japanese) usually disliked. They served a lot of it in the camps. So there would often be an entire platter of the stew that I could enjoy to my heart’s content at dinnertime.

My mother had sold fish at the store in Loomis, and our friend had worked for many years at the Capital Fish Company in Sacramento and had contacts with wholesalers outside. Both knew their fish well; they also knew how much Japanese loved fish, how they craved fresh fish, which was rarely served in the mess hall.

They decided to use what savings they had to start a cottage business selling fresh fish. They put in an order with Paladini Fish Company in San Francisco, and within a week a box of fish packed in ice arrived by railway express and was delivered to our door. We would leave the box outside on the shady side of the barrack, and the fish would stay fresh for several days. No matter how hot it got during the day, it was always cool or even cold in the shade.

What was fun was watching people who came from blocks around—seeing their expressions of pleasure ogling the fish, then buying some, knowing full well it was a luxury since meals were provided in the mess hall. Within a day or two most of the fish were sold; those that were left, usually smaller fish like mackerel, kingfish, or sardine, were salted lightly and left out in the sun to dry. After trying the dried kingfish, quickly cooked on a potbellied stove, I realized why it was so highly sought after—it was incredibly good. Mother and our friend sold a lot of fish and built a modest nest egg during that time.



I belonged to the Tule Lake Writers Club and the Tule Lake Little Theater, administered by the camp recreation department. Both were great creative outlets for me, and they gave me a chance to pursue my interest in the arts. Strangely, going to camp was an exciting time for me; I was able to do what I absolutely loved to do . . . at least at first.

The writers club met once a week. When I was involved in a play, I was at the theater every night, either rehearsing or performing.

Everyone in the writers club was encouraged to write something to be read to the group for comments and criticisms. Not everyone wrote; I learned later that many were there as observers.

Those who wrote were writing about life before camp—about city life and college life, both new and unfamiliar to me. Some wrote fiction in the hard-boiled detective mode or in the Dos Passos or Hemingway style. It all sounded great and everyone was impressed, including me.

Most of the members were college students from the University of California (UC) at Berkeley or UCLA; to me, a mere high school graduate and a country kid at that, they seemed highly educated and very sophisticated. I knew I didn't belong with them, but my interest in writing drew me to the club. Feeling small and inadequate, I sat quietly, watching and listening to what went on.

I wrote a story based on something that happened just before evacuation; it was autobiographical, handwritten, about a country boy longing for a radio and finally one day going by Greyhound bus to Sacramento where he bought a small Zenith radio. What a thrill that was—a brand-new radio, all his own, that played loudly and clearly, especially at night. But he didn't get to enjoy it for long because of the war and evacuation.

I don't remember what happened after that. I remember that the story was titled "The Zenith Radio." After I finished reading it to the group, I thought there would be some reaction but there was none, just

silence. Why didn't they say something? Did they not like it? I have often wondered. Or did they resent the fact that this young country hick had shown them up, had written a story that had moved them; or was the story too close to home?

Based on their silence, I decided it wasn't much of a story. Later, the leader of the club wanted to publish the story and asked me for it, but I had thrown it out. I realize now that I missed a rare opportunity as the magazine the *Tulean Interlude*, a collection of writings done in camp, became a primary source material for scholars and is deposited in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, along with other camp documents.



These are among the memories that have stayed with me through the years. But like everything else in camp, these pursuits were only a temporary diversion from the harsh realities imposed upon us by the war.



In January 1943 the US Department of War issued a loyalty questionnaire entitled "Statement of United States Citizenship of Japanese Ancestry." The key questions were numbers 27 and 28, which read:

No. 27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?

No. 28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?

The War Relocation Authority (WRA) used the same questionnaire

to identify internees who could be released from camp.

The process was called "Registration." Right away, our family was caught up in the confusion over the loyalty questions and went to see what the others were doing. In our family, the burden fell heavily on my mother. Her primary concern was to keep us together; her fear was that if we registered, my brother and I would be forced out of camp, possibly into the service, and the family would be broken up further. If my father had been with us, I don't know what we would have done, what his decision would have been. I know it would have been much easier for us because he would have made the decision and we would have either followed it or not.

Here was my position: why was I, an American citizen, thrown in prison without cause, without due process? I had registered for the draft, as required of citizens of my age and sex in 1942; why were they questioning my loyalty now? How could they do that? I was an American, a loyal American. If they restored my status as a rightful citizen, let me go free, out of this prison, I would do anything required of me. Why should I answer the questions? I would follow my conscience and refuse to register.

Block 42 was one of the first ordered to register. Most of the young men there had signed up for "repatriation" to Japan, an ironic choice since they were all citizens of the United States and many had never been to Japan. I think the administration picked them first to register as punishment.

When no one appeared at the block office on the designated day, the authorities took action. Around five o'clock in the afternoon the mess bells rang out, urgently and alarmingly, announcing the arrival of soldiers to round up the recalcitrant internees. The young men were forced onto the army truck at bayonet point. Everyone was outraged, and emotions ran high. Mothers, girlfriends, brothers, and sisters tearfully bid goodbye to the young men who were being taken to the county jail outside of camp. This show of force by the administration

was meant to break down our resistance, but it only hardened our resolve to resist. We returned to our apartment to pack our bags and await our turn to be taken.

But the Block 42 men were soon released because the WRA had no cause to hold them. We continued to resist, and nothing happened. Years later, I was devastated to read in Michi Weglyn's classic *Years of Infamy* that the registration order had not been compulsory; there was nothing compelling us to register other than their threats, a fact the administration never disclosed to us. To this day, many believe the order was compulsory.

Furthermore, the threat of twenty years in jail and/or a \$10,000 fine for noncompliance had been just that: a threat, all lies. Laboring under these conditions, fearful and uncertain, everyone at Tule Lake had to make their choice: we either answered "yes" or "no," or we refused to answer the loyalty questions.



Since we refused to register, my family and I were called before camp officials to clarify our position regarding the questionnaire in August of the same year, six months after registration. I told the official that I did not want to answer the questions while I was held in camp and treated as if I were a dangerous alien. I said it was unfair to ask this only of American Japanese and not of American Germans and American Italians. I tried to make my case, but the official said I had no choice—I had to answer the questions one way or another. I gave "no" answers in protest of what my government had done to me and my family.

For following our conscience, we were held back at Tule Lake while those who professed their loyalty by answering yes/yes to the questions were allowed to leave camp. The majority went to the East Coast.



Tule Lake became a segregation center, a maximum security prison for “disloyal” Americans. And we became known as the infamous “No-No Boys,” a stigma that would mark us whenever the subject of camps came up, which was often.

Among Japanese Americans, the most common question upon meeting after the war was, what camp were you in? Since camp was our shared experience, I suppose the question is a natural lead-in to a conversation, but I dreaded it. I hated to lie so I always answered directly, “I was at Tule Lake.” Think whatever you want; I did what I had to do. I’m not proud of it and I’m not ashamed of it . . . or am I? Or are you making me feel ashamed?

Because of this difficulty, I felt alienated from the community and tried to avoid other Japanese as much as possible after the war. In college, I acquired a reputation for being eccentric or even arrogant for refusing to socialize with other Japanese American students. Most of my college friends were actually white veterans who were not interested in wartime experiences, theirs or anyone else’s. Their goal was to complete their education under the GI Bill.



The camps we went to were officially called Arboga Assembly Center and Tule Lake Relocation Center. No matter what the government insisted on calling them—internment camps, relocation centers, or any other name—they were still prisons. There was barbed-wire fence with guard towers manned by MPs armed with rifles and machine guns directed toward us—the inmates.

The searchlights from the guard towers were eerie at night. Many of the soldiers were recent transfers from the war in the South Pacific, young, nervous, and trigger-happy. We didn’t dare go near the fence

for fear of being shot at—there were tragic instances of that. But aside from the physical confinement was the invisible fence enclosing our spirit; this imprisonment of the spirit, the psychological effect, even more than the actual fence, was the most ravaging part of the camp experience, leaving a scar that would remain with us for the rest of our lives. I can certainly attest to that.