FBI's role firing Issei, Nisei, railroaders, miners found

BY MICHI WEGLYN

The inordinate power wielded by J. Edgar Hoover, who ruled over the FBI for nearly fifty years, is legendary. If there was one man in political life that even Franklin Delano Roosevelt feared, it was Hoover. The President frequently bypassed Hoover’s superior, Attorney General Francis Biddle, and dealt directly with the FBI chief. Hoover could be counted on to act decisively, to resort to police-state tactics, unfettered by constitutional conscience. Certainly, Hoover’s agents-in-the-field knew better than to make potentially controversial decisions or to take action without first consulting the “chief.” Whatever the situation, Hoover was in total control.

When evaluating the significance of World War II documents that expose the FBI or Hoover as Players, I have to focus a moment on the forceful uncomprising character of Mr. Hoover. As we race against the Redress deadline, let’s keep in mind that FDR gave Hoover’s civilian agency prime responsibility for protecting our nation’s vital industries and transportation networks, such as mines and railroads.

Thanks to Andrew B. Russell, a graduate student at Arizona State University who wrote his Master’s thesis on Japanese Americans in wartime Nevada, I have been made privy to some remarkable materials that clearly expose FBI involvement in mass layoffs of Japanese workers.

Fumie Shimada of Sacramento discovered Russell’s thesis while searching for information related to the Southern Pacific Railroad’s dismissal of her father and data that might help prove the rigidly controlled nature of her family’s subsequent “relaxed internment” in Reno, Nevada. We owe much to Ms. Shimada and Mr. Russell for bringing to light what I consider some “smoking gun” documents, long sought by those Russell refers to as “the forgotten victims.” He does not support the Office of Redress Administration’s (ORAs) sweeping assumption that the government played no role in the layoff. Based on considerable research, his conclusion is that “the federal government was, in part, responsible for the dismissal of most of them.”

Excerpts from documents uncovered by Russell’s pioneering research better than to rebuke the FBI chief’s arbitrary style. Already, Hoover’s public and media image ballooned larger than life; he made Americans feel safe and protected.

The worst assault against Japanese railroad workers occurred in February 1942, as devastating military defeats continued to mount upon Allied forces in the Pacific Theater. During one of the darkest weeks of the war, President Jefferson of the Union Pacific Railroad capitulated to the “Yellow Peril” fear and hysteria of his workers who belonged to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. The railroad president seemingly requested and got the “green light” to lay off Japanese workers from Hoover on February 11, and subsequently from Attorney General Biddle.

A letter from Jefferson to Commanding General, Seventh Corps Area, dated February 11, 1942, stated: “... I talked with Mr. Hoover of the FBI and subsequently talked with Attorney General Biddle and ... I was given to understand that they saw no objection.” On February 13, the Union Pacific Railroad fired over $8.7 million campaign opens for WDC memorial
December 8, 1941—Minutes from a meeting of the White Pine County Council of Defense held that evening showed that L.J. Bean (another Nevada Northern official) stated: "Mr. Bean has requested that all Italian aliens in our service must receive 90 days on work detail under guard. A call to Nevada Governor Edward Carville and the FBI brought news that the Japanese were to stop working immediately. Finally, security in the knowledge that the minutes report the Union Pacific Railroad fired every Japanese worker on its lines by February 13, the Council of Defense held that evening in Winnemucca and Nebraska.

By February 18, most Japanese had been fired from such lines as the Santa Fe, the Western Pacific, Northern Pacific, Southern Pacific, the Great Northern and others. Families served with overnight eviction notices became America's first horde of the homeless. Not only was their material loss incalculable, but valued pre-existing relationships suffered from sudden termination. Children were yanked in and out of schools as their families moved from our section living quarters and, we are able to get relief forces on the job. A number of the Japanese who were cut off, and I have been told that many of this group were essential in the work of the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until the Japanese off the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until

December 11, 1941—The day Germany and Italy declared war on the United States: A letter written by H.M. Peterson (an official of the Nevada Consolidated Copper Company) reveals that the "workers are under guard. A call to Nevada Governor Edward Carville and the FBI brought news that the Japanese were to stop working immediately. Finally, security in the knowledge that the minutes report the Union Pacific Railroad fired every Japanese worker on its lines by February 13, the Council of Defense held that evening in Winnemucca and Nebraska.

December 12, 1941—A letter written by L.J. Bean (another Nevada Northern official) to Mr. Daniel Jackling (CEO of the Nevada Consolidated Copper Company) disclosed that if such Italian aliens "had been fired from such lines as the Santa Fe, the Western Pacific, Northern Pacific, Southern Pacific, the Great Northern and others. Families served with overnight eviction notices became America's first horde of the homeless. Not only was their material loss incalculable, but valued pre-existing relationships suffered from sudden termination. Children were yanked in and out of schools as their families moved from our section living quarters and, we are able to get relief forces on the job. A number of the Japanese who were cut off, and I have been told that many of this group were essential in the work of the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until the Japanese off the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until.

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December 13, 1941—A letter written by R.C. Brooke (another Nevada Northern official) to Mr. Daniel Jackling (CEO of the Nevada Consolidated Copper Company) disclosed that if such Italian aliens "had been fired from such lines as the Santa Fe, the Western Pacific, Northern Pacific, Southern Pacific, the Great Northern and others. Families served with overnight eviction notices became America's first horde of the homeless. Not only was their material loss incalculable, but valued pre-existing relationships suffered from sudden termination. Children were yanked in and out of schools as their families moved from our section living quarters and, we are able to get relief forces on the job. A number of the Japanese who were cut off, and I have been told that many of this group were essential in the work of the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until the Japanese off the line between McGill Junction and Cobre and house maintenance between those points until.

Perhaps Russell will delve even deeper into this sadly-neglected chapter in American history for his Ph.D. dissertation. Moreover, let us hope that documents like these will at least lead to redress payment for the Japanese and others sanctioned railroad layoffs—before time runs out.