

# Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment Testimony

Japanese American witnesses at the first Los Angeles hearing of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians delivered stirring testimony Tuesday. Former inmates of American concentration camp recalled tales of human tragedy as well as material loss for the commission's record. We re-print excerpts here for the edification of our readers.

## MABEL T. OTA



I graduated UCLA in summer, 1939 and was married to Fred Kaname Ota the following year in April, 1940. With \$500 in our savings as down payment, we purchased a small house in Los Angeles and settled down to married life.

Fred was employed as a salesman in wholesale produce. I worked as cashier in a retail market; took a L.A. city civil service exam, and worked as a clerk in the Fingerprint and Identification Bureau of the L.A. Police Department until the war burst upon us. Then, the police decided it was inconvenient to have a Japanese working in their department and had me transferred to the Jefferson Branch Library for a six-week assignment, and then terminated my assignment without cause.

The War Relocation Authority announced a call for volunteers to go ahead to Poston, Arizona to help prepare the place for resettlement. Since we would end up there anyway, Fred and I decided to volunteer to go early . . .

By the latter part of 1942 the administration began encouraging people to leave camp if they could find a sponsor. Fred was offered a job in New York by the Quakers. He left camp but I stayed behind because I was pregnant and expecting a baby in May, 1943. The baby arrived a month early—after eight months gestation on April 13, 1943.

When I arrived at the hospital, a nurse checked me in. She stated the doctor had delivered three babies and had collapsed so he had returned to his barracks for a much needed rest. After 28 hours of labor, the nurse became concerned and sent for doctor. Dr. Wakamatsu examined me and said: "Your baby's heart-beat is getting very faint. I will have to use forceps to deliver the baby and I will have to give you a local pain killer because we do not have an anesthesiologist. We can't wait any longer because we do not have a resuscitating machine to revive the

she was not red but white. She was rushed to the incubator and I did not see her for three days. I was told that she was too weak to be moved.

When I saw her I noticed a large scab on the back of her head. She has a bald spot there to this day. Madeline is a developmentally disabled person. She is mentally retarded and has gran mal epilepsy.

When she was three-years old she was admitted to the Hollywood Children's Hospital for a week of tests and observations. Dr. Lyttle, then head of the hospital, stated that it appeared she had suffered brain damage.

Many, many times I have wished that Madeline could have been born by Caesarean operation. She may then have been a normal whole person. Madeline has attended private schools for exceptional children and is now attending a private sheltered workshop. We have paid monthly fees for her education for over 30 years.

The second tragedy in our lives was the early death of my father, Suezo Kawashima. My father had been a diabetic since his 30s but with insulin injections and careful and selected diet, he was living a normal life.

At Poston, there were no special diets available to anyone.

By 1942, Madeline and I left Poston and joined Fred in New York.

Early in April 1944, I received a letter from my mother in Poston asking me to return because my father had been admitted to the hospital. We returned to Poston. The doctor informed me that my father's diabetes was arrested but he was suffering from melancholia. He further stated that there were no facilities for treatment in Poston but he could arrange for father to be transferred to a Phoenix rest home, where he could receive shock treatments which might effect a cure.

Father was admitted to Clark's Rest Home. He said to me that it looked like an expensive place to stay. I reassured him that we would take care of all the costs and for him to recover as soon as possible. Five and a half weeks later, we received an urgent call from Dr. A.C. Kingsley stating that father did not have very long to live. We rushed to Phoenix and saw him about half an hour before his death on May 16, 1944. Dr. Kingsley informed me that the camp doctor had misdiagnosed father's illness. The camp doctor had only given urine analysis tests which showed sugar free. Subsequently, Dr. Kingsley administered a blood test and it showed that the diabetes had worsened. Father had gone into a diabetic coma and died. He did not have melancholia—so the shock treatments had not been necessary. His death certificate states that the cause of death was due to diabetes.

Both Fred and I feel that we have had successful careers: Fred in wholesale produce and I as an educator. Because of Madeline I returned to college, got an elementary teaching credential, became a teacher and then was the first Asian woman principal in California. We live comfortable, middle class lives in our retirement. However, we are always concerned—what is to become of Madeline when we are gone? She

bought from the Capt. Cook Coffee Company, in Kona, Hawaii. The mortgage was not cleared up yet at the time of the evacuation. On the midnight of December 7, 1941, my husband was taken away by two policemen without any reason. My children and I were so shocked that we couldn't sleep until morning. We were not told where he was taken. The next day, I was ordered to close my store and no business was allowed. I had to work at my uncle's coffee farm to earn our living.



I was a Postmaster of a fourth class post office and my husband was the Asst. Postmaster. The FBI came a few days after my husband was taken away and ordered me to leave my position. I had to transfer everything to a new Postmaster. I taught her how to operate a postoffice and sold her everything that belonged to the postoffice for only \$15, which was a typewriter, adding machine, safe and others.

The following year I was told to evacuate to Arkansas. This would put me close to my husband's internment camp located in New Mexico. I had to then sell everything which I was not allowed to take to the mainland United States.

We arrived in Arkansas on January 5, 1943. I went to work in the mess hall for \$8 a month. After 16 months, my husband was allowed to join us at the relocation camp. He had suffered a stroke at the internment camp in New Mexico, and when he came to our camp, he could not walk or talk. I took care of him . . . bathing and feeding him until the day he died in March of 1953.

I worked in the garments factories after the war ended and supported my sick husband.

## DR. MARY S. ODA



camp, a reaction to the terrible dust storms and winds. The asthma became intractable and she died at the age of 26. My oldest brother, a dentist, had consumed a quart of milk daily most of his young life. In camp, adults were not allowed to have milk, only children under five. He ate the pickled vegetables and rice daily, the dried fruit preserved with sulfur and developed intestinal obstruction. Because by this time there were no competent surgeons left in camp, he was shipped to Los Angeles County General Hospital, where he died after surgery. He had developed cancer of the stomach at age 30, three years after evacuation. My father, too, was sensitive to the winds and dust, and developed constant nasal irritation and died of nose and throat cancer. All three had entered the camps in good health, then died within seven months of each other, three years after evacuation. Their deaths could be attributed to the stresses of the disruption of their lives, the extremely poor diet, exposure to the terrible winds and dust in camp. Ten years later, I saw the identical diet given to retarded children in the state hospital for the mentally retarded.

Post evacuation: The ones who suffered the most after the war was over were our parents. My father, when dying, said he was going back to North Hollywood to farm again. Had he lived, he couldn't possibly have started over again at age 68. With my father's and oldest brother's deaths, and the other members of my family being unable to support my mother, she went to work as a farm laborer. So, after living in this country for 34 years, raising seven children, my former school teacher mother who taught school in Japan for seven years before coming to this country, was working on a farm doing stoop labor. She carried the ashes of my father, brother and sister with her for several years. When she received the government's token compensation for the family's losses, the \$1800 paid for the gravestones under which the three are now buried.

## JOYCE S. TAMAI

I am 47 years old and presently reside in Orange, California. I am actively employed in the field of nursing. I am a member of the Nisei generation and would like to give my personal account of my experience in camp.

I remember Santa Anita and the stench and filth of the stables, standing in line for everything and my mother doing the wash on a board in tubs on platforms and the unrest and riots which left me as an eight-year old with fear. I don't know how long we were in Santa Anita before we were taken by train and ended up in Jerome, Arkansas. I recall the sticky heat in the summer and the bitter cold winters and the frostbite on my legs that got infected and left me with the scars I have today. I did not adjust to camp life. I could not communicate in Japanese and was ridiculed by other children and adults. It was not easy to make friends, for me it seemed I made enemies easier. I was not raised in a Japanese community before camp life. It was at this time I began to feel that being

the baby and I will have to give you a local pain killer because we do not have an anesthesiologist. We can't wait any longer because we do not have a resuscitating machine to revive the baby."

I remember many details in the delivery room. After using the scapel to cut me he picked up the forceps. I thought they looked like the ice thongs used by iceman when he delivered a block of ice—only the ends were long and flat—not curved and pointed. After much pulling he finally got the baby out. She gave one very faint cry and I thought

the first Asian woman principal in California. We live comfortable, middle class lives in our retirement. However, we are always concerned—what is to become of Madeline when we are gone? She can never live independently.

#### KATSUYO OEKAWA

I was born in Kona, Hawaii. I am 77 years old. I lived in Honaunau, Kona, Hawaii, till the time of evacuation in November, 1942.

My husband Tokushi Oekawa and I had a store which we



The emotional toll taken on my family was considerable. My younger sister suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in a mental institution for five months. The physical toll was even greater. My older sister developed bronchial asthma in

make friends, for me it seemed I made enemies easier. I was not raised in a Japanese community before camp life. It was at this time I began to feel that being Japanese was not good. I remember feeling that at times I could defend myself for being Japanese but then I would question myself and ask, "If being Japanese is good, why are we prisoners?" This conflicting attitude stayed with me for a long time after my camp experience and throughout my school years.

... My mother remembers the change in my father from the day he came home after selling his place of business to find her sitting on an apple box in the middle of an empty room. From that day my father became "ill." My mother made all the decisions for the family from that time on. My father became progressive.

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ly less able to be fully employed and my mother became very strong and worked hard to keep the family together. My father was sincere and supportive during this time. He died in 1964.

#### SALLY KIRITA TSUNEISHI



The idyllic life of the Japanese people in Hawaii was shattered with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Hawaii had a very large population of Japanese laborers in the pineapple and sugar fields. My father, an immigrant from Kumamoto, Japan, settled in Kohala as a storekeeper at the turn of the century. As a scholarly gentleman, he became the president of the Japanese community and language school, the town's news reporter for the **Hawaii Hochi**, letter writer for the many illiterate laborers and the official matchmaker—a **baishakunin**. On Dec. 7, he was stunned by the news of the bombing he believed to be air raid practice. But that night, he was arrested by an FBI agent, with our town sheriff apologizing for the middle-of-the-night intrusion. That scene was repeated in homes of many Japanese leaders in Hawaii.

With father's internment, mother was left with seven young children without any means of support. Because of the dark cloud of suspicion hovering over our heads, the people did not patronize our store. For months, we lived on the generosity of a few neighbors and the produce of our victory garden...

Almost 40 years have passed, but I can never forget the day when the army truck rolled in front of my home. Because we were singled out from the large Japanese community, we were filled with an unspeakable shame. We were no longer a part of the community. We became outcasts of society. I remember think-

As the trucks passed by high school, I had goose bumps when I saw the American flag flapping furiously in the wind. I thought of my prize-winning essay that I had written for my English class titled: "Why I Am Proud to Be An American." As tears streamed down my face, an awful realization slowly dawned on me—I am an American with the face of the enemy. The added trauma of being uprooted from my friends and home left me confused and with a deep sense of loss.

Father was detained at Camp Livingston in Louisiana. As the eldest in the family, I was granted permission to go and visit him. I was shocked to see him stoop-shouldered, aged beyond his years as he came shuffling slowly toward me with the help of a cane. He had become a tuberculin, having cared long hours for the other internee patients. With his little background in medicine, he had cared for the sick, who otherwise might have been neglected. It was a painful reunion for a father and daughter. After two and a half years, he was allowed to join us at Arkansas camp. He was broken in health and spirit. To see him return to us so changed was the single most painful experience that I bear of the evacuation.

