

“Not Fit for Human Habitation”: Portland’s Wartime Japanese American Detention Camp

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As the “iron gate clamp[ed] behind” her at the Pacific International Livestock Exposition in North Portland, Ida Nakamura likened her emotions to a prisoner’s “when he is sent to the penitentiary.”¹ It was May 1942, and Ida, a seventeen-year-old Portland native, had arrived with her family at the Portland Assembly Center, which the government had converted from the livestock facility to detain Oregon and southwest Washington residents of Japanese ancestry. Ida would remain at the Portland Center until the following September, when the Army transferred her family to the Minidoka Relocation Center, one of ten ‘permanent’ incarceration camps where the United States sent the 120,000 forcibly assembled Japanese Americans. For months, Ida’s family and hundreds of others languished in shelters constructed on animal pens, the paucity of their resources and agency accentuating their incarceration. Their bleak confinement inspired as much terror as a binding sense of persecution. At its peak, the Portland Assembly Center crowded 3,676 people into makeshift stalls constructed on thin planks covering livestock manure. The civilians---mostly families---battled hunger, pestilence, disease, and uncertain futures.²

Shortly after her arrival to Minidoka, Ida wrote to her former classmates at Parkrose High School, noting that the four months she had spent at the Portland Assembly Center were “indeed nothing to talk about,” describing how her “heart ached” at the “thought of having to leave Portland, [her] birthplace and all of [her] friends behind.”³ Perhaps to distract from her sadness,

¹ Ida Nakamura. *Letter to Parkrose High School*. Catalog Number 2015.8.1, Japanese American Museum of Oregon (Patricia Gilman Collection. September 14, 1942).

² Oregon Metro, “The Expo Story | Expo Center,” www.expocenter.org (Metro, 2012); George Katagiri, “Japanese Americans in Oregon,” www.oregonencyclopedia.org (Oregon Encyclopedia, June 30, 2023).

³ Nakamura, *Letter to Parkrose High School* (September 14, 1942).

Ida, along with her new friends from Yakima Valley, Washington, threw themselves into cleaning their cramped residential units and workplaces, proudly reporting that the army inspectors gave the Portland Center a 99%, with the “nearest competition...6 points down.”⁴

Ida, however, spared her friends the details of the putrid stench of livestock waste that no amount of tidying up could eliminate, which wafted through her family’s tiny quarters on hot summer days.

Ida’s brief allusions to the Center preceded a lack of scholarly interest in the detention of thousands of civilians at the Pacific International Livestock Exposition. As the history of Japanese American internment has long been defined by its superintendents and appreciated for the hundreds of thousands of lives affected, the statistically ‘smaller’ segments of the larger saga have been overshadowed by more impressive numbers or have been generalized in relation to the greater story. Manzanar, the most populous of the internment camps with mostly California-hailing detainees, has become the popular stand-in for the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans, with less attention being paid to smaller sites of incarceration, including Portland’s detention camp. Historical references to Oregon’s famous livestock exposition-turned-detention camp are consequently minimal and often included just as the pretext for the more consequential four-year mass incarceration throughout the American interior.⁵ The history of the Japanese diaspora in America has been defined geographically in Southern California and temporally with wartime mass incarceration, resulting in the sidelining of Oregon’s Japanese Americans and their unique experiences. I thus rely on the excellent, though limited, research on Oregon’s Japanese population preceding the bombing of Pearl

⁴ Nakamura, *Letter to Parkrose High School* (September 14, 1942).

⁵ Perhaps no source reduced the assembly centers to a prologue more notably than in the official account of the incarceration saga authored by a congressional committee in 1984; *Personal Justice Denied*, 1st ed. Washington, D.C (Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997).

Harbor, placing it in the frameworks developed to study other sites of incarceration.

There have been a few significant post-war works of scholarship devoted to Japanese Oregonians. Barbara Yasui and Eiichiro Azuma were among the first to make entries about the local Japanese diaspora into Oregon's historical lexicon, both centering the 'pioneer generation,' the *Issei* (first-generation Japanese Americans), in their work.⁶ Other important Oregon-centered scholarship on Japanese Americans includes Linda Tamura's 1993 book *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley*, which surveys the experiences of first-generation Japanese Americans who settled in rural Hood River, and Lauren Kessler's book published the same year, *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family*, which chronicled the lives of the notable Yasui family who settled in Hood River. By no means extensive in quantity, the available scholarship on the Japanese communities in Oregon provides a strong account of the Oregon Nikkei experience.

Without ignoring or discrediting the existing thoughtful local scholarship on the Japanese diaspora in Oregon, I must acknowledge a relative lack of research on Japanese Oregonians (compared to Japanese Californians) in the late 1930s and early 1940s—a crucial period of fervent anti-Japanese hate domestically amidst an ascendent imperial Japan globally. The history of the Nikkei in Oregon at the turn of the decade is synonymous with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the army-executed assembly and relocation of the few thousand Japanese Oregonians. The limited but excellent research on these Oregon communities preceding the December 1941 Pearl Harbor bombing will be the basis of my conceptualization of these close-knit, largely agricultural, distinctly Oregon communities and contextualize the people locked behind the iron gates Ida Nakamura describes.

⁶ Barbara Yasui. "The Nikkei in Oregon, 1834-1940." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (1975): 225–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20613473>. Eiichiro Azuma; "A History of Oregon's Issei, 1880-1952." *Oregon*

In her 2018 book, *Nature Behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration*, historian Connie Chiang contends that the environment heavily influenced the selection, construction, and administration of the permanent Relocation Centers. She further describes how environmental situations demanded adaptation or alteration from officials and internees and notes how nature became a medium through which the internees demonstrated patriotism—or rejected it. Research specifically into the Japanese Oregonians’ plight was limited: the constituency directly affected was a fraction of the overall Japanese American population, and beyond initial detainment at the Portland Assembly Center, Oregon did not host a permanent wartime camp. Nevertheless, Chiang’s conscious balance between the prisoner, the warden, and the prison itself in her study of the broader internment offers a compelling framework for studying the environmental histories of other sites of Japanese American incarceration.

The hasty conversion of a stockyard to a detention camp prioritized governmental efficiency and economy, disregarding human needs and basic dignity. Oregon officials and the privately-owned Pacific International Corporation capitalized on wartime disruptions to the livestock industry to re-appropriate an agricultural state landmark, the Pacific International Livestock Exposition, as a civilian detention camp, the Portland Assembly Center. Under military authority, the local administrators repurposed the livestock exposition’s facilities to maximize efficiency at the cost of viable family living—or even basic sanitation and accommodation. The Portland Assembly Center local administrators and their Army supervisors paired the facilities and practices of livestock management with the prevailing models of human imprisonment to cost-effectively and efficiently detain Oregonians and Southwest Washingtonians of Japanese ancestry at the Portland International Livestock Exposition.

Portland Center authorities anticipated and relied upon detainees' coerced labor to ensure the smooth functioning of day-to-day operations, deliberately linking labor to patriotism and communal duty. Authorities further deployed hard and soft methods of surveillance and control through both the visually austere security measures as well as the cordial intrapersonal relationships that individual administrators cultivated with detainees. Though overt, organized resistance to their situation was negligible, many detainees and their outside friends conspired to increase the material and emotional comforts of the Center in defiance of authorities' wishes.

Arrival to Assembly

On April 28, 1942, Saku Tomita's world turned upside down.⁷ After months of waiting anxiously, her family and thousands of others had finally heard their fate from the United States government. On that spring Tuesday, the United States military released Exclusion Order 25, followed shortly by Order 26. Together, the Orders directed virtually every Oregonian of Japanese ancestry to prepare for their upcoming removal to the Portland Assembly Center for an indefinite period.⁸ A forty-one-year-old mother of two teenagers, Mrs. Tomita described in her diary how, "in a great hurry, we packed up all our household goods" and prepared the allotted one bag for each family member to take to the Center.⁹ The Tomitas, like most other Japanese Oregonian families, knew very little about the facilities and accommodations of the Portland Assembly Center, their new, indefinite residence. From a newsletter distributed by the Portland chapter of the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL) over a week earlier, Mrs. Tomita and her friends had been informed that the livestock pavilion, which was now expected to house 3,900 people, was "clean and odorless," and that "everything possible had been taken into

⁷ Zuigaku Kodachi, Jan Heikkala, and Janet Cormack, "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1980): 151.

⁸ Oregon Secretary of State, "State of Oregon: World War II - Oregon's Japanese Americans Learn Their Fate," accessed January 2024.

consideration for the comfort of the inhabitants.”¹⁰ The JACL did advise to bring “plenty of blankets” as there was no “heating for the various apartments.”¹¹ However, the organization confidently asserted its expectation that the children’s areas, including the nursery and playroom, would be heated.¹² With little more than this optimistic report by Portland JACL leaders (who had obtained the information from Center officials but had not visited the site personally) and an April 29 *Oregonian* article stating that the Assembly Center had been “stocked with food and other living necessities,” Mrs. Tomita bid farewell to her friends who had escorted her to the Control Station and stepped into her new home.¹³

A crucial consideration in deciding where to confine the West Coast-based Japanese Americans during the construction of the “semi-permanent” relocation centers was the governmental objective to “minimize the impact of evacuation...upon the economy.”¹⁴ The Portland Assembly Center was one of fifteen euphemistically named ‘Assembly Centers’ constructed as temporary “concentration camps” during the construction of more permanent “relocation centers.”¹⁵ In his Letter of Transmittal of the *Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942*, Commanding General John L. DeWitt boasted that aside from the cost of construction and other startup expenses, “the entire cost was \$1.46 per evacuee per day” on average for the duration of operations.¹⁶ The federal government and U.S. military worked closely with state and local officials to find regionally central sites with existing facilities and

⁹ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 151.

¹⁰ Portland Chapter Japanese American Citizens’ League. *Newsletter and President’s Message*. Catalog Number 2011.01.1, Japanese American Museum of Oregon (Rose Niguma Collection. April 17, 1942).

¹¹ Portland Chapter JACL. *Newsletter* (April 17, 1942).

¹² Portland Chapter JACL. *Newsletter* (April 17, 1942).

¹³ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 151.

¹⁴ John L. DeWitt, “Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942” (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943): 151; ix.

¹⁵ Konrad Linke. "Assembly centers," *Densho Encyclopedia* <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Assembly%20centers> (accessed May 21 2024).

¹⁶ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): ix

functional utilities.¹⁷ Additionally, military personnel stressed the requirement of an “area within the enclosure for recreation and allied activities as the necessary confinement would otherwise have been completely demoralizing.”¹⁸ Consequently, the majority of assembly centers were constructed at fairgrounds and horse racetracks, with the exception of the Oregon, Pinedale, and Sacramento sites (the latter two were both in California).¹⁹ Oregon and US military and government officials thus selected the Pacific International Live Stock Exposition in North Portland as the site for the Portland Assembly Center.

Far from being a deterrent, the Portland Livestock Exposition’s decades-long history of confining animals was the Army’s main consideration for detaining civilians. “The Animal Live Stock Exhibition in Portland,” a 1920 Port of Portland brochure had proclaimed, “is World Famous.”²⁰ Constructed by the privately owned Pacific International Corporation in 1919 to support the popular annual exhibition, the livestock pavilion and compound had housed the “largest stock yards and packing industry on the Pacific Coast.”²¹ The Exposition building initially enclosed over seven acres underneath a single roof, with a stadium large enough to seat 8,500 people, three show and sale rings, and a movie theater that had made it the “most complete building of it’s [sic] kind in the United States.”²² When the federal government took a year-long lease of the property in 1942 for \$27,000, the indoor compound covered a little over eleven acres, which by then enclosed a concourse building housing a restaurant, two other halls, an arena, a show ring, and “various animal pavilions, including dairy, beef, swine, horse, sheep, and

¹⁷ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 151.

¹⁸ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 151.

¹⁹ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 151.

²⁰ The Port of Portland Commission and the Commission of Public Docks. *The World’s Sea Lanes Lead to the Port of Portland*. City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/7823 (1920).

²¹ Port of Portland Commission et al, *Port of Portland* (City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/7823. 1920).

²² *North Portland, Oregon: The Leading Livestock Market of the Pacific Northwest Souvenir Book*. City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/34482 (November 1919).

an area...for dog shows.”²³ The livestock facilities, in particular, made the Exposition and its Californian counterparts (racetracks and fairgrounds) an appealing choice for the government to confine large groups of civilians within, given their capacity for feeding, sheltering, and washing. Environmental historians have demonstrated how marginalized people have routinely been metaphorically linked to animals by their oppressors to demonstrate their “otherness,” but there was nothing metaphorical about the way the military administered the assembly center.²⁴

Cramped and with little privacy from neighbors, the residential area of the Portland Assembly Center remained more suited to housing livestock than humans. Divided into seven sections of 80 to 150 ‘apartments’ with an eighth section solely for the residence of single men, the residential quarters enclosed the central arena (see Fig. 1). Once used for rodeos and livestock exhibitions, the arena now served as the hub of evacuee community life and recreation.²⁵ The Tomita’s and their neighbors’ new quarters were uniform 200 square-foot units (for a family of four to eight) separated by eight-foot-high thin, plywood partitions constructed on wooden planks laid over the old dirt and manure-strewn floor of the central animal pens.²⁶ Men’s and women’s showers were located on opposite ends of the pavilion, each with around six shower outlets but with “no partitions,” generating a “lack of privacy” that was “devastating” for many evacuees (see Fig. 2).²⁷ The faucets also proved unreliable—during her first shower, Saku Tomita turned the cold knob, releasing scalding water, and suffered such a severe burn that she

²³ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed January 2024).

²⁴ Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan : Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City*, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard University Press, 2014), doi:10.4159/harvard.9780674735989; Andrew Robichaud *Animal City : The Domestication of America*, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard University Press, 2019), doi:10.4159/9780674243187.

²⁵ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024).

²⁶ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024); Oregon Secretary of State, “State of Oregon: World War II - Japanese Americans Move to the Portland Assembly Center,” accessed February 2024.

²⁷ Henry Sakamoto, “Henry Sakamoto Interview,” interview by Jane Comerford, *The Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection*, Densho Digital Archive, October 17, 2004.

was advised not to shower for several days.²⁸ The worst part, civil rights activist and lawyer Minoru “Min” Yasui reflected in a later interview, was not that “the physical interior...was so depressing,” but that the “exterior, the livestock barn itself was surrounded completely by man-proof barbed wire fences” with a watchtower at each corner.²⁹ Behind the barbed wire, Yasui recalled much of the “depressing” interior to be substandard for humane living, describing the “place [as] not fit for human habitation.”³⁰

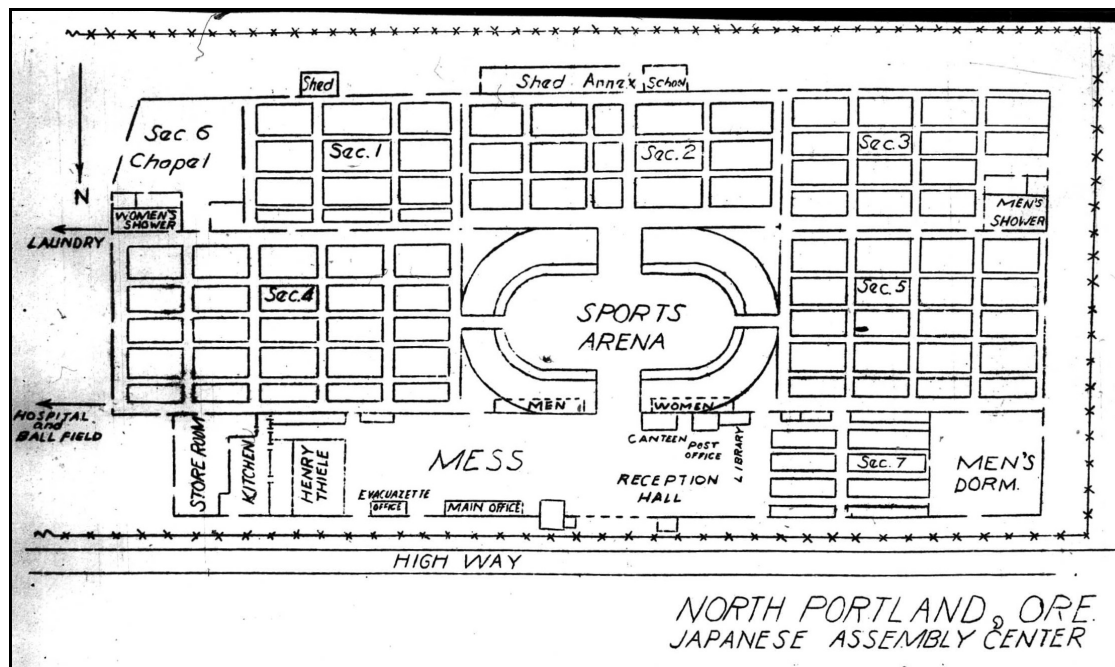


Figure 1: *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed January 2024). A hand-drawn map of the Center as published in the sixth issue of the *Evacuazette* as an aid for newcomers.

²⁸ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 154-155.

²⁹ Minoru Yasui, interviewed by Steven Okazaki, Segment 6, Oct. 23, 1983, Hood River, Oregon, Steven Okazaki Collection, Densho Digital Repository.

³⁰ Yasui, Interview.

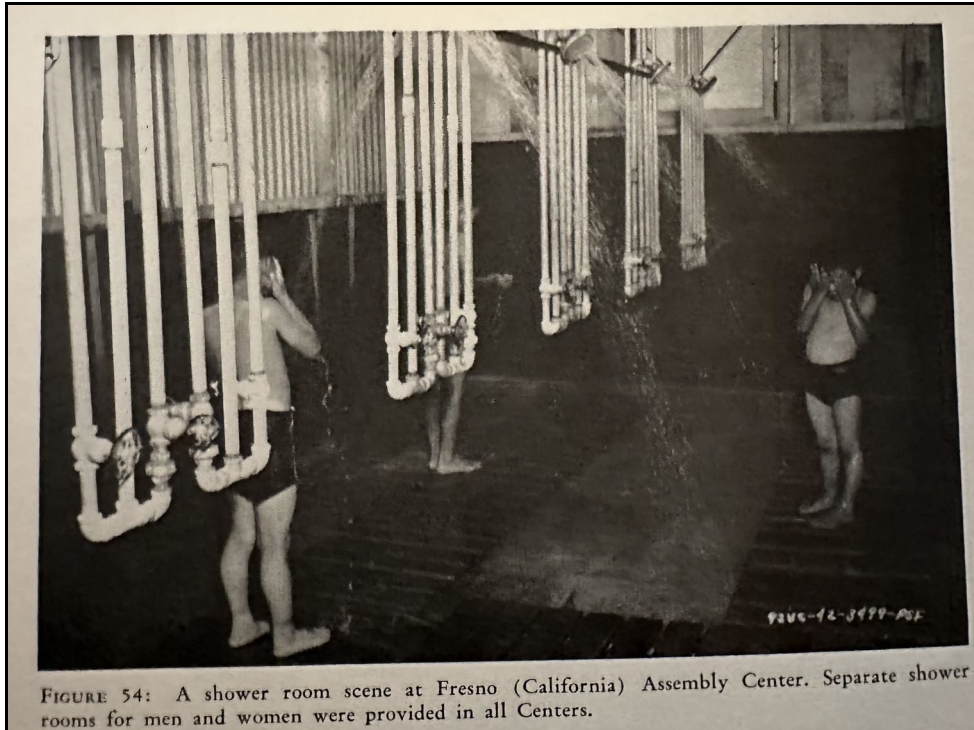


Figure 2, John L. DeWitt, “Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942” (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943): 460. A photo of the shower room at the Fresno Center. A similar layout would have been used in Portland.

“On arriving,” Mrs. Tomita wrote in her diary, “I found the facilities better than I had expected,” indicating her very low expectations for her new situation.³¹ Though compact, the ‘apartment’ assigned to her family was furnished with “new and comfortable” steel cots, straw or cotton-stuffed mattresses, and “a single, bare light bulb.”³² After a quick lunch in the mess hall of coffee and bread with jelly and with spinach, hash-browns, and pudding as sides, Mrs. Tomita constructed a shelf for the family quarters and hung a mirror to “add a more ‘homey’ atmosphere to [the] room.”³³ The thin, makeshift walls reached less than halfway to the high pavilion roof, provided little privacy from sound and odor pollution, and combined with no heating source,

³¹ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 151.

³² Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 151; SOS “Japanese Americans Move to the Portland Assembly Center.”

³³ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 153.

made Mrs. Tomita's first night "very cold."³⁴ Despite her daughter, Nanako, and her friends [being] quite excited" and "very happy," Mrs. Tomita hinted at her growing fatigue and worry from an "exhausting day" and having "very little to eat."³⁵ As the chatter of hundreds petered out in the twilight, Mrs. Tomita, restless from the hacking noises of the whooping cough-afflicted children next door, looked through the high window. Under the beam of a searchlight, she could make out a young soldier armed with a rifle stationed on a nearby bank. Drifting into an uneasy sleep, Mrs. Tomita recalled later that while she felt sorry for him, she "did not know who was the happier one—the guard or me."³⁶

Life in the Center

The excitement and uncertainty Mrs. Saku Tomita and her family felt upon arrival at the Assembly Center soon gave way to a monotonous dullness with occasional pangs of apprehension over their unknown future. Though Mrs. Tomita did not seek work in the center, her daughter and husband did find positions with opposite schedules, and Mrs. Tomita was obliged to accommodate both. Her days revolved around her declining health, running errands for unit neighbors, and persistent hunger from the inadequate food supply. Deprived of the freedom of their previous lives, detainee life revolved around coerced labor, painful hunger, and poor health. The intense communal structure, imposed by close living quarters, shared facilities, and functional interdependence, fostered kinship and, at times, animosity.

From the first arrival at the Portland Assembly Center, evacuee labor was an essential component for smooth Center operations. Evacuee laborers cooked the meals, washed the dishes, performed janitorial duties, and practiced medicine. On her second day at the Portland Center,

³⁴ Oregon Secretary of State, "Japanese Americans Move to the Portland Assembly Center;" Kodachi et al., "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita," 153.

³⁵ Kodachi et al., "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita," 153.

³⁶ Kodachi et al., "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita," 153.

administrators drafted Ida Nakamura as a waitress in the mess hall, a position she held until her departure.³⁷ Mrs. Tomita's daughter Nanako, similar in age to Ida, also found work in the kitchens, waking up at 5:30 every morning since her arrival to work in the pantry (see Fig. 3).³⁸

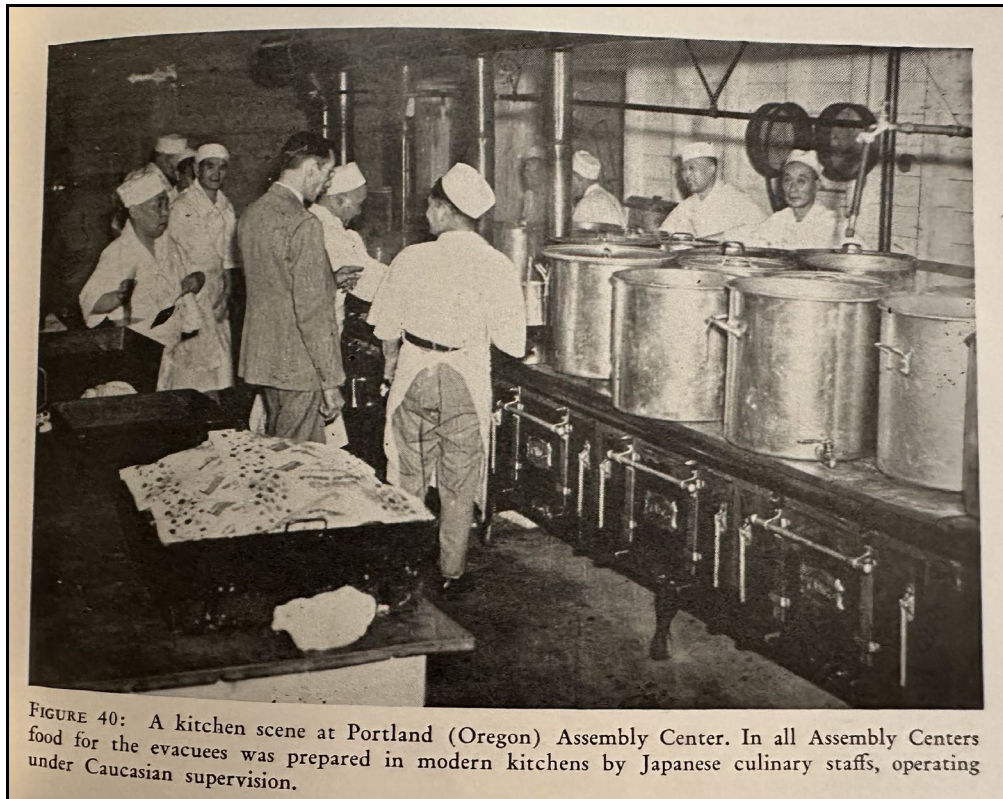


Figure 3, John L. DeWitt, “Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942” (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943): 453. The kitchen staff at the Portland Center.

The government and military officials who strove to keep costs down and productivity up quickly availed themselves of the captive labor force they had cultivated. Within the first weeks of assembly, the Wartime Civil Control Administration (W.C.C.A) offered nominal freedom in exchange for work through a few different labor programs—albeit mostly restricted to young, able-bodied men.³⁹ By the end of May, the W.C.C.A sent 250 “volunteers” from the Portland

³⁷ Nakamura, Ida. *Letter to Parkrose High School*. September 14, 1942; *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed 9, 11, 26, 2024).

³⁸ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 153.

³⁹ The Wartime Civil Control Administration (W.C.C.A.), established by General John L. DeWitt as an agency headed by the Western Defense Command responsible for building and administering the temporary ‘Assembly

Assembly Center and 100 evacuees from the Puyallup center to Tule Lake, California, where an eponymous Relocation Center was under construction.⁴⁰ The “vanguard work crew” signed up under assurances of a “better and bigger place” than the Assembly Center with the added bonus of being “allowed to leave [Tule Lake] to work,” tying lofty ideals of liberty once more to labor.⁴¹

Another early ‘labor for liberty’ opportunity for Portland detainees was in Nyssa, Oregon (Malheur County) in that area’s agriculture industry. Shortly before the May exclusion orders that precipitated the round-up of Japanese Oregonians, county and state officials recognized the urgent need to cultivate the recently planted sugar beet fields covering 12,000 acres. The officials immediately appealed to the War Relocation Authority (WRA) for the provision of Japanese laborers from the incipient Portland Center.⁴² A “particularly laborious crop,” sugar beets were essential to wartime production for their versatility in explosives and drinking alcohol. Despite concerns expressed by the Portland JACL over recent credible threats of “vigilante action” against Japanese in Malheur County and having extracted assurances from Oregon officials “that the labor would be entirely voluntary,” the federal government transferred fifteen able-bodied men to Nyssa on May 21. The program proved enormously popular amongst the Portland Center detainees, and by June 11, four hundred inmates had left the confinement of livestock facilities for hard farm labor at the “camp without a fence.”⁴³

Centers’ before the detainees’ transfer to “more permanent camps administered by the War Relocation Authority by the end of fall 1942;”

Brian Niiya. "Wartime Civil Control Administration," *Densho Encyclopedia*

<https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Wartime%20Civil%20Control%20Administration> (accessed May 20, 2024).

⁴⁰ *Evacuazette*, newspaper published semiweekly from the North Portland Assembly Center in two volumes (Vol. 1, no. 1 (May 19, 1942)—v. 2, no. 4 (Aug. 25, 1942), Microfilm Room (Portland #75), Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR, (accessed January 9, 11, 26, 2024).

⁴¹ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed January 9, 11, 26, 2024).

⁴² “Nyssa, Oregon (Detention Facility),” in *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed February 2024).

⁴³ Oregon Secretary of State, “State of Oregon: World War II - into the Sugar Beet Fields: Japanese American Laborers,” accessed January 11, 2024; “Evacuee Volunteers Praised for Work in Oregon Fields,” *Pacific Citizen*, July 2, 1942, as quoted in “Nyssa, Oregon (detention facility)” (*Densho Encyclopedia*)

Despite early estimates of 3,900 inmates in total, the Portland Assembly Center's mess hall and dining plan were under-resourced to serve the nutritional needs of the Japanese Americans. The U.S. Army of Engineers had built the mess hall with a capacity for 2,000 people, and soon realizing the insufficiency, the Center Management drew up a two-shift meal schedule. Detainees would line up by shift, waiting for a whistle to blow, at which point a 2,000-person shift "would advance" en masse toward the tables.⁴⁴ Young women like Ida Nakamura were employed as waitresses to shepherd diners to their seats, serve and bus tables, facilitate the shift change, and shouldered "[continual] complaining...about the condition of the food."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Center's food quality became a source of frequent complaint: one evacuee described it as "pretty lousy," while another noted the unfamiliarity of the meals as they were "not Japanese cooking...very plain."⁴⁶

Dismal food quality aside, administrators admitted that the initial budget proved "too conservative at first," accounting for Mrs. Tomita's springtime entries repeatedly expressing that there was "so very little to eat."⁴⁷ In the Western Defense Command's final report, officials admitted that the original average ration cost of 33 cents per person per day simply proved insufficient, despite earlier boastful statements that ration allowance was significantly less than that "prescribed by the Army for its soldiers...[of] 50 cents per person per day."⁴⁸ The Wartime Civil Control Administration (W.C.C.A) subsequently took "special care and attention" to rapidly improving the quality and quantity of the "food for infants and small children" by allocating resources and personnel to deliver formula every four hours and priding itself on

⁴⁴ Sakamoto, interview.

⁴⁵ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed February 2024); *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed 9, 11, 26, 2024).

⁴⁶ Sakamoto, interview; Mae Hada, "Mae Hada Interview," interview.

view by Masako Hinatsu, *The Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection*, Densho Digital Archive, June 18, 2003.

⁴⁷ DeWitt, "Final Report" (1943): 186; Kodachi et al., "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita," 155.

⁴⁸ DeWitt, "Final Report" (1943): 186.

providing “scalding water for the sterilization” of necessary feeding equipment.⁴⁹ By early July, the W.C.C.A.-censored evacuee newspaper, the *Evacuazette* reported almost 250,000 meals served in June, and that at any given breakfast, inmates consumed “1,285 grapefruit, 250 lbs. of rolled oats, [and] 100 lbs. of coffee.”⁵⁰ By the end of June, Mrs. Tomita had written nothing more about the food quantity or quality, indicating an improvement in both.

Modeled after a military camp layout, every assembly center had at least an infirmary and dental clinic (see Fig. 4), and the larger centers, including Portland, had a ‘hospital.’ Medical care was administered at no cost to the evacuees; all services, the commanding general’s office reported, were “furnished to all on an equal basis by the Army.”⁵¹ The Army prioritized the allocation of ethnic Japanese doctors and nurses at centers but soon found to their disadvantage that, perhaps because of anti-Japanese restrictions in higher education, “the total number of Japanese doctors and nurses in the entire evacuee population was low.”⁵² At the Portland Center, two doctors of Japanese descent were on medical staff alongside three dentists, four nurses, and eighteen nurse’s aides, who served a population of a few thousand.⁵³ Under the supervision of a white chief medical doctor, the Portland Center medical staff and Doctors Shiomi and Kinoshita saw an “average of fifty [hospitalized] patients...and 200 outpatients a day.”⁵⁴ Evacuees were only sent to outside hospitals for the most serious surgical cases, and the center hospital, set up in the high-ceilinged livestock Pavilion, handled all other operations and medical services, including prenatal care.⁵⁵ The overcrowding at the hospital prompted the W.C.C.A. to set up a twenty-four-hour first aid station by the end of May, and later a lab and

⁴⁹ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 188.

⁵⁰ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed January 2024).

⁵¹ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 192.

⁵² DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 190.

⁵³ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed February 2024).

⁵⁴ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed February 2024).

⁵⁵ DeWitt, “Final Report” (1943): 192.

pharmacy.⁵⁶

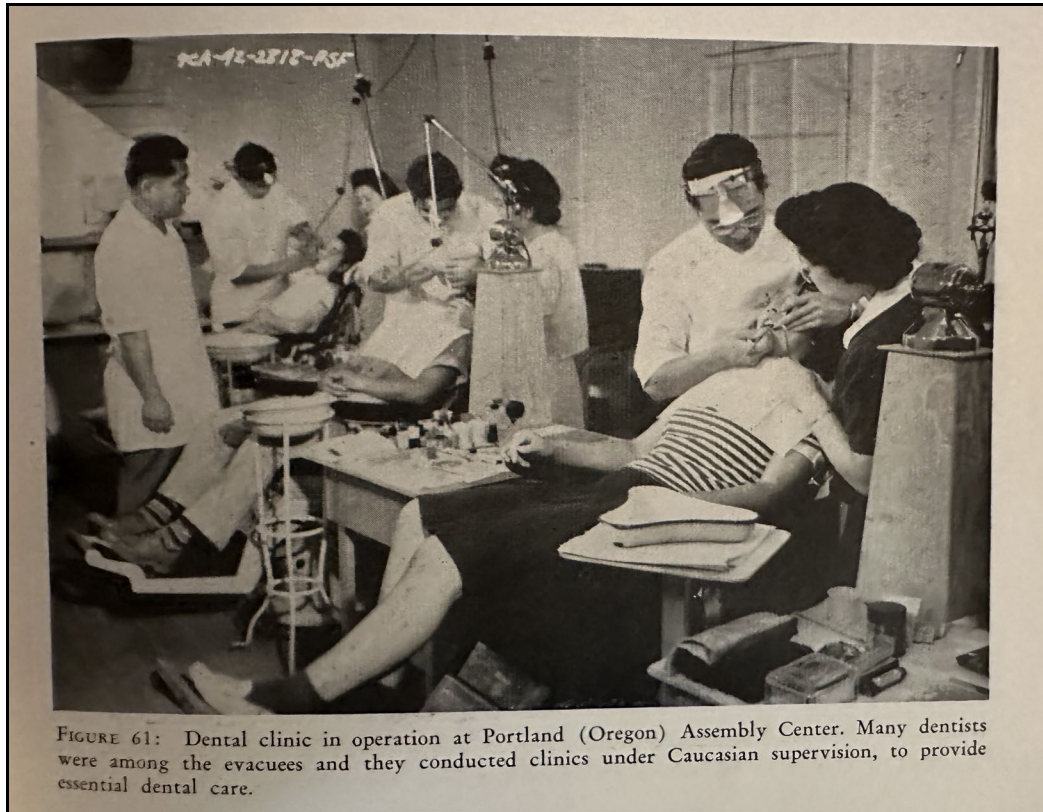


Figure 4, John L. DeWitt, “Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942” (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943): 463. A photo of the new ‘modern’ dental chairs recently installed.

Beyond addressing acute care emergencies, the Army also took pains to prevent infectious outbreaks. Anticipating the latent potential of contagion within the confines of an indoor residential space, the W.C.C.A took proactive measures to establish preventive health care on-site. By the third week of operations, the Center had established the medical infrastructure to inoculate over 1500 people against typhoid in a single day.⁵⁷ The process was orderly and efficient: identification tags were checked against lists (inoculations were mandatory), and medical staff, in concert with the Portland Health Bureau, administered typhoid shots to the assembled inmates. Aside from typhoid vaccinations, the Center mandated smallpox

⁵⁶ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed February 2024).

⁵⁷ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (May 22, 1942).

inoculations for all detainees and diphtheria vaccinations for young children to limit viral infections.⁵⁸ Despite the Army and the medical staff's best efforts, infectious outbreaks interfered with day-to-day life.

“MEASLES CLOSE-UP SCHOOL,” blared the *Evacuazette* on the front page of its July 10th issue. Below the headline, a short paragraph noted that the kindergarten and primary school would remain closed for at least ten days due to the “appearance of measles cases among the children of the Center.”⁵⁹ Buried on the bottom of the third page in the same issue, the *Evacuazette* published an “IN MEMORIUM[sic]” notice for six-year-old Akira Shimura, who had “succumbed early [that] morning at the local hospital,” accounting for one of the four reported Portland Center inmate deaths.⁶⁰ Though no reference was made to the child's cause of death in his tribute paragraph, the *Evacuazette* admitted later that it had been measles that prematurely killed Akira. While detainees were able to attend the “special memorial services,” only his “parents and two close friends” were permitted a short leave from the Center for his funeral service.⁶¹ Ten days after the Center performed “little Akira Shimura's” final rites, the *Evacuazette* triumphantly announced the end of the “epidemic,” noting that “no new cases” had been reported since the week prior. The newspaper praised the evacuee's “cooperation” in preventing further spread.⁶² No mention of the ‘epidemic’ or even the death of six-year-old Akira was made in the Commanding General's *Final Report*. The rosy 600-page review presented a picture of sterling sanitation and cheerful cooperation by the Japanese detainees in maintaining public health. The Army stressed that incidents to the contrary were quickly resolved abnormalities proving the responsiveness of the Center's health infrastructure.

⁵⁸ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (May 22, 1942).

⁵⁹ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 10, 1942).

⁶⁰ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 10, 1942); Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed January 2024)

The heat wave that swept North Portland in the summer of 1942 bore down in earnest on the Assembly Center detainees, who had no source of cool air inside or outside of the vast compound. “The temperature outside has grown so hot,” Mrs. Tomita wrote on July 1, describing how she sought shade under a tree near the baseball field for some relief.⁶³ That same week, the *Evacuazette* announced that the meeting to organize an internal governing body had been canceled “due to adverse weather conditions,” an indication of the severity of the heat.⁶⁴ Temperatures climbed into the triple-digits, at one point reaching 107 degrees. Though there were no major heat-related illnesses reported, inmates had to contend with another affliction: the stench of rotting animal manure. “The odor was so bad!” one Hood River detainee recalled, observing that though the Army had laid down planks on top of the dirt-and-manure mixture, the rank smell of the decades-long buildup of livestock refuse had wafted up through the pavilion, becoming unbearably pungent on hot days.⁶⁵

The heat-induced stench yielded another hazard to cleanliness and peace of mind: bugs. By mid-July, the fly infestation had become so onerous that a cartoon drawing of the insect earned prime positions on either side of the banner title of the July 21st issue of the *Evacuazette*. At the bottom of the page, another sketch of a fly in motion—presumably getting swatted—appeared with the caption “DO YOUR PART KILL A FLY” (see Fig. 5)⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 14, 1942).

⁶² *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 24, 1942).

⁶³ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 161.

⁶⁴ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 3, 1942).

⁶⁵ Masaji Kusachi, as quoted by Linda Tamura, *The Hood River Issei: An Oral History of Japanese Settlers in Oregon's Hood River Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993): 177.

⁶⁶ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 21, 1942).



Figure 5, *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (accessed January 2024). The front page of an *Evacuazette* issue in late July, with fly cartoons heavily featured in the margins.

The Center management launched a “fly swatting campaign,” promising to purchase hundreds of “fly swatters and spray guns” to tackle the invasion.⁶⁷ Center Manager Nicholas L. Bican also ordered several thousand sticky “fly ribbons” as part of the Center’s “war on flies.”⁶⁸ Contests were eventually held to see who could kill the most insects, and the tally became a point of pride for younger inmates.⁶⁹ The seven-acre compound, suitable for livestock habitation, repeatedly proved inadequate and unsanitary for cramped human living. The W.C.C.A., unwilling to release the detainees or find a more humane alternative, resorted to short-term fixes, often leaning on the

⁶⁷ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 21, 1942).

⁶⁸ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (July 21, 1942)

⁶⁹ Minoru Yasui, “Minoru Yasui Interview,” interview, *Steven Okazaki Collection*, Densho Digital Archive,

participation and labor of the Japanese American inmates to mitigate the most urgent hazards.

Surveillance and Control

While the Army insisted outwardly that the conditions of the so-called Assembly Centers were humane, just, and efficient, actions at every level demonstrated the intentionally rigid measure of control the Army exercised over every facet of detainee life. Indeed, inside the Center, the Army was keen to display its dominance to its prisoners. Saku Tomita, Ida Nakamura, and their 3,600 fellows were reminded regularly of the Army's pervasive surveillance by the beams of the watchtowers' searchlights, frequent inspections of their living quarters and mail parcels, and the twice-daily roll call and nighttime curfew.⁷⁰ The army employed one civilian policeman for every two hundred detainees, who were permitted to enter and search living quarters without a warrant at any time.⁷¹ Indeed, the Wartime Civil Control Administration (W.C.C.A.) originated out of concerns that the original plan of just two white police officers per Center would not be enough to "insure [sic] that disaffection among the evacuees would not become rampant."⁷² The W.C.C.A. was therefore responsible for regulating the inmates' movements and actions.

Fearful of uprisings and riots, the Army prioritized the maintenance of a base level of morale amongst detainees. Operating on a shoestring budget, the W.C.C.A. authorized the organization and administration of Recreation Departments at the Centers, responsible for planning activities and events. At the Portland Assembly Center, the largest existing arena, once

October 23, 1983.

⁷⁰ While War Department denied Colonel Karl Bendetsen's attempt to get a "blanket warrant to open and censor domestic mail," the army still opened many letters, mostly inter-camp mail; Konrad Linke. "Assembly centers," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed Mar 10, 2024); Shelley Baker-Gard, Michael J. Freiling, and Satsuki Takikawa, eds. *They Never Asked: Senryū Poetry from the WWII Portland Assembly Center*. (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2023): 8; Linke, "Assembly Centers."

⁷¹ Linke, "Assembly Centers."

⁷² DeWitt, "Final Report" (1943): 217.

used to show livestock, became the primary space for indoor recreation, while a seven-acre space in the parking area was reappropriated for outdoor activities. Administrators strictly regulated both indoor and outdoor recreation facilities with rules and schedules. Baseball and softball reigned supreme among the evacuees, with an eight-team ‘AA’ men’s league, four-team ‘B’ men’s league, and seven-team women’s softball league established by the end of May.⁷³ The *Evacuazette* dedicated at least one page per issue to covering the baseball season, and weekend games regularly drew crowds of a thousand detainees.⁷⁴ Inside, the indoor arena boasted two basketball courts and two tennis courts, with amenities for badminton, wrestling, and weight lifting. Aside from sports, the Recreation Department hosted frequent socials and dances for the youth, as well as weekly movie shows, all of which the *Evacuazette* covered in glowing terms.

The English-language newspaper was another leverage point the Army used to control the detainees. Despite describing itself as a “free press” by and for Center residents, the *Evacuazette* remained under the “direct supervision of [the] director of the service department” for the duration of its publication.⁷⁵ Articles critical of Center management, operations, or personnel were virtually nonexistent.⁷⁶ On the contrary, most issues ran at least one complimentary article about an aspect of the administration, often featuring interviews with various administrators and Center staff. Indeed, the *Evacuazette* became a crucial point of contact between Center Management and detainees to give notices, updates, and warnings, an indication of close collaboration between the editors and administrators. Leveraging foundations of American culture from baseball to ‘free’ journalism, the Army justified prison protocols to enforce compliance and silence.

⁷³ Brian Niiya. "Portland (detention facility)," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed January 2024).

⁷⁴ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library; Linke, “Assembly Centers.”

⁷⁵ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (May 26, 1942).

⁷⁶ No headline in the *Evacuazette* referenced any criticism of the Center Management.

The Japanese detainee community, especially the older immigrant generation, fearful of penal retribution for dissenting to their incarceration, largely complied, at least grudgingly, with the forced removal from their homes. Indeed, the oldest national Japanese political organization, the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL), urged "gracious acceptance" of exclusion and removal orders, calling them the Japanese American community's patriotic "contribution to the national defense effort."⁷⁷ Furthermore, the Army and W.C.C.A. held frequent fundraising drives at the Center, soliciting monetary and material donations to support the war effort.⁷⁸ The National JACL condemned the "self-styled martyrs" in their "fight for the rights of citizenship," including Hood River native Minoru Yasui.⁷⁹ An early critic of the government's wartime actions in restricting the rights of Japanese Americans, the lawyer Yasui deliberately broke the curfew imposed on the community in March, hoping to challenge his potential arrest as a test of the curfew and other restrictions' constitutionality. His case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court, where he lost his appeal alongside Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi.⁸⁰ Minoru Yasui continued to fight against the incarceration of his community and the Japanese American community at large from the Portland Assembly Center, despite most of the Portland Center detainees agreeing with the JACL position.⁸¹

Despite the tenuous dynamic naturally existing between the Center Management and the thousands of civilians they were charged with overseeing, the Japanese American detainees

⁷⁷ Portland Chapter JACL. *Newsletter* (April 17, 1942).

⁷⁸ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library; Kodachi et al., "Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita" (1987).

⁷⁹ Portland Chapter JACL. *Newsletter* (April 17, 1942).

⁸⁰ Born and raised in Hood River, Yasui was the first Japanese American to graduate from an Oregon law school, where-after he was unable to find work in the legal field and moved to Illinois to take a position with the Japanese Consulate General of Chicago. Immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Yasui left his job to return to the Pacific Northwest to fulfill his Army Reserves obligation. Nine unsuccessful attempts to enlist later, he returned to Oregon and set up a law practice in Portland to serve the Japanese community. His wartime activism and later career in civil rights law earned him a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2015, Gil Asakawa. "Minoru Yasui," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed Mar 10, 2024); Stan Yogi. "Coram nobis cases," *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed Mar 13, 2024).

appreciated the empathetic approach and attention to their needs. In his first written address to his wards, Center Manager Emil Sandquist articulated his desire for “the cooperative spirit [that] advanced so far be continued” and that all problems, “individual and collective,” be referred to his office so that the “morals and morale of the community will be enhanced.”⁸² So admired was he that by July 7, the W.C.C.A. promoted Sandquist to the chief of the W.C.C.A. Operations division, and the Manager position passed to Nicholas L. Bican, a former manager of the shuttered Marysville Assembly Center.⁸³ Sandquist and Bican seemed to have been attentive to the detainees. They were generally engaged wardens, with Sandquist sending an urgent request for forty-eight additional toilets and Bican ordering equipment to keep the flies at bay.⁸⁴ Upon the announcement of the detainees’ transfer to the Minidoka Relocation Center, many of the inmates signed a petition asking that Sandquist, as well as the other Portland administrators, be transferred to Minidoka.⁸⁵ While this detail indicates that the Center management was generally respected and liked by the detainees, it is hard to say for certain that this was the case given the imbalanced nature of their relationship and situation.

Resistance

The Army’s extensive surveillance into the lives of the detainees and their capacity for harsher forms of incarceration fostered an environment hostile to constitutionally protected speech and protest. Despite the euphemistic language the Army and government used to describe the ‘evacuation’ and ‘relocation’ of civilians, the detained Japanese Oregonians were keenly aware of their precarious, already unjust position. Consequently, expressions of dissent by the

⁸¹ Yasui, interview.

⁸² *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (May 19, 1942).

⁸³ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

⁸⁴ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024); *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

⁸⁵ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024).

detainees were subtle, often unorganized actions or even thoughts to undermine the total authority of their captors. Detainees were thus obliged to turn elsewhere for a less-sanitized, rosy representation of goings-on at the Center. Private writing, which, while not risk-free, was less likely to be discovered, especially if written in Japanese. Inter-center notes, diary entries, and poetic musings became the medium through which dissenting thoughts were rendered. A clandestine *senryu* poetry group writing Japanese verses on despair and the personal diary of a middle-aged mother journaling about the lack of food: these were the unremarkable, unnoticed forms of dissent the detainees deployed.⁸⁶ Some detainees also engaged in an illegal gambling ring tucked away in a spare room off the restaurant, their banter and the rules incomprehensible to a passing white soldier.⁸⁷ The gathering of young and old men playing the card games of their ancestral land was an open secret amongst the inmates, but however appalling to other, more moralistic detainees, even illicit Japanese gambling was preferable to the egregious action of public and open protest.

For Mrs. Tomita and her peers, the regular visits that her non-Japanese friends and acquaintances made to the Portland Assembly Center became one of the few things she could reliably look forward to during her detention. On May 8, Miss Gates, Mrs. Hodge, and Mrs. Walker made their first trek to the former livestock exposition to see their dear friend, if only from on the opposite side of the barbed wire fence (see Fig. 2).⁸⁸ As a silent soldier kept close watch of the exchange, the three women “promised to do everything they could” for the Tomita

⁸⁶ *Senryu*, a form of Japanese poetry, shares an origin in ancestral *renga* poetry with its better-known cousin, *haiku*. A defining characteristic of *renga* is its “multiple linked verses, written collectively by multiple poets.” *Senryu* is similarly a collaborative form of short, linked verses.

Shelley Baker-Gard, Michael J. Freiling, and Satsuki Takikawa, eds. *They Never Asked: Senryū Poetry from the WWII Portland Assembly Center*. (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2023); Baker-Gard et al., *They Never Asked*; Brian Niiya. “Portland (detention facility),” *Densho Encyclopedia* (accessed January 2024); Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita” (1987).

⁸⁷ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024).

⁸⁸ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 154.

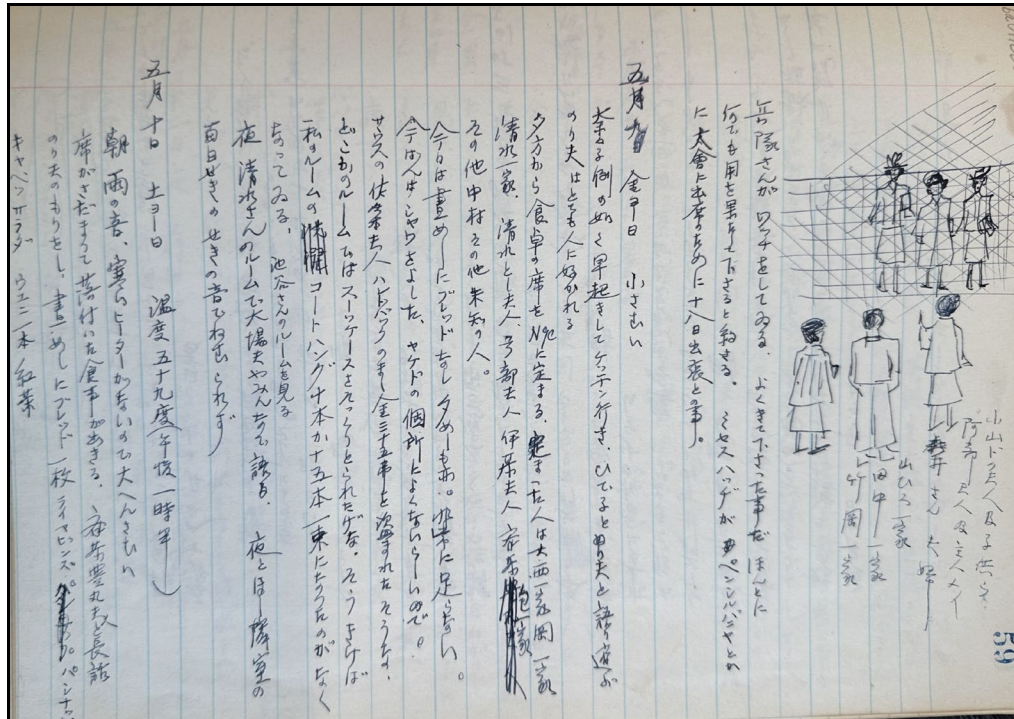


Figure 6, Diary of Saku Tomita, 1942, Mss 1482, Vault, Oregon Historical Society Research. An early entry from Mrs. Tomita’s diary, with a sketch of her meeting her friends on the other side of the barbed wire fence.

A week later, however, the Center Management imposed heavier regulations on visiting due to what the Center Manager Emil Sandquist described as the “large amount of visiting requested” to justify increased control over one of the few liberties remaining to the detainees.⁹⁰ Mrs. Tomita would have conducted the rest of her visits with her friends in a designated ‘visitor’s room’ managed by the chief of the internal police and by prior reservation for a two-hour block.⁹¹ By the end of May, Center police subjected visitors to a thorough registration process and bag search to ensure no contraband entered the Center via outside means.⁹² Still, those on the outside who were willing to put up with the arduous security measures to see their friends within the compound provided not only material security to ensure that their Japanese American neighbors,

⁸⁹ Kodachi et al., “Portland Assembly Center: Diary of Saku Tomita,” 155.

⁹⁰ Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024).

⁹¹ *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

students, and friends had supplies but emotional connection as well.

Conclusion

In the final paragraphs of her letter to her former classmates and faculty, seventeen-year-old Portland native Ida Nakamura wrote, “On Sept. 8th at 2:30 P.M., I took my last look at Portland.” From the small train window, Ida “kept [her] eyes peeled in hopes of seeing anyone” as the Union Pacific passed by her former high school, but in vain.⁹³ “With a heavy heart,” Ida watched as the campus disappeared out of sight.⁹⁴ She made no further mention of her detention at the Portland Assembly Center, speaking instead that the conditions of her new life at Minidoka in Idaho were “none too favorable.”⁹⁵

Ida’s letter was written during the prologue to her incarceration at the Minidoka Relocation Center. Even while she recounted her stint living in livestock facilities, Ida set her eyes firmly towards the future, looking beyond the wooden stalls of the Portland Assembly Center. Most scholars of Japanese Americans in the Pacific Northwest have similarly located the Portland Assembly Center as a placeholder before the real horrors of the more commonly researched internment camps. For the 3,676 Oregonians and southwest Washingtonians detained at the livestock facilities, however, the Portland Assembly Center was more than the waystation between freedom and incarceration. The Center was itself a site of cruel and unusual punishment inflicted on civilians without due process on account of their heritage. While more research needs to be done, especially on the top-level accounts and interactions of government and military officials, my scholarship provides a preliminary look at the detainees’ experiences incarcerated at an Oregon landmark. Despite rigid Army control and appalling environmental

⁹² Niiya, “Portland (detention facility)” (accessed January 2024); *Evacuazette*, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

⁹³ Nakamura, Ida. *Letter to Parkrose High School* (September 14, 1942).

⁹⁴ Nakamura, Ida. *Letter to Parkrose High School* (September 14, 1942).

conditions, the Japanese Americans detained at the Portland Assembly Center developed cogent forms of resistance and endeavored to alter or adapt to their new environment, forging new community bonds that transcended their secondary displacement to ‘permanent’ relocation centers around the country.

⁹⁵ Nakamura, Ida. *Letter to Parkrose High School* (September 14, 1942).