

What Would You Do?

If Heroes Were Not Welcome Home

by Linda Tamura and Marsha Takayanagi Matthews

From August 24 to September 29, 2013, the Oregon Historical Society in partnership with Oregon Nikkei Endowment will host an exhibit of the Nisei Congressional Gold Medal, bestowed collectively on the U.S. Army's 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and the Military Intelligence Service, units comprised almost entirely of persons of Japanese ancestry. Linda Tamura and Marsha Takayanagi Matthews describe here their personal relationships with that history and their plans to augment the exhibit with material specifically related to Oregon.

TAMURA

History gripped my senses in the summer of 1979, as I sat in the basement of my hometown library, poring over yellowed issues of my local newspaper. I was studying the time period surrounding World War II while investigating the life of my grandmother, a picture bride from Japan. I had learned how my mother and grandparents had been removed from their homes and forced to live in wartime camps on American soil. While they were incarcerated, my father was serving our country in the U.S. Army. What a surprising view I gained from those newspapers about the valley where I was raised! There were notices discouraging Japanese Americans from returning home after the war. The 1945 headline from one of several full-page ads attested: "Japs Are Not Wanted in Hood River." Even more

unsettling was the list underneath of hundreds of residents who had signed the appeal. I recognized names of neighbors, family members of my classmates, even a former teacher.

What had happened to provoke such actions against my parents, grandparents, and other Japanese Americans? How could this happen in my own community? And why was this episode unfamiliar and unspoken, not even warranting a lesson in my history classes?

Those questions incited my own wonder about events of the past. My curiosity led to more questions about my immigrant grandparents, their settlement in a country where language and culture were foreign, and the dislocation they encountered as the United States, their new homeland, went to war with Japan, the country



Courtesy Linda Tamura

While Linda Tamura's father Harry Tamura (far right) served in the United States Armed Forces, his family was incarcerated at Tule Lake camp in northern California, where he visited in 1943. Pictured left to right are: a family friend (name unknown), Harry's brother George, brother-in-law John Ito, mother Michiko, and army buddy Chik Aoyama.

of their birth. My search extended to queries about my parents' generation of American citizens who attended local schools as well as to hometown issues that had silenced my community for decades.

After I learned that local American veterans had been publicly discredited, in a move that cast a spiteful eye on my hometown from across the country and overseas, I made a personal commitment to uncover answers. More than anything, my intrigue about the silence that hung over my community paved the way for questions that others avoided and that still affect minorities today: What if Americans who served valiantly overseas found that there was still a battle to wage at home? What if they clashed over the principles of lib-

erty and equality once they returned? And what could we learn that would help us address issues we face today?

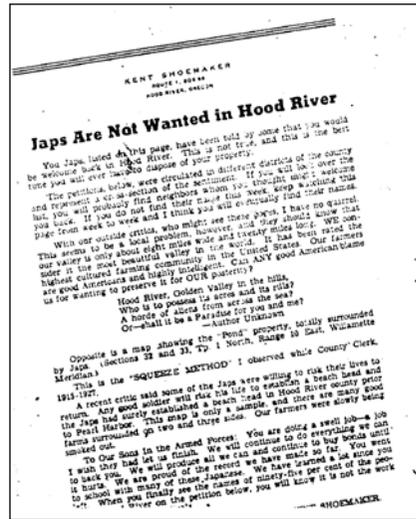
Those investigations paved new roads for me as a scholar and author and influenced my approach as an educator as well. I wondered how others might also begin to actively examine past events with a discerning eye, to view situations through different lenses, and to consider their own responses and solutions.

Our upcoming exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society, *What If Heroes Were Not Welcome Home?*, will take a step in that direction. Our goal is to engage visitors in reliving wartime events that brought national notoriety to an Oregon community. Visitors will be invited to examine different

viewpoints and to consider what they would think, how they would feel, and what they would do. We want people to make meaningful connections with the past, the present, and their own lives. We want them to wonder about next steps they might take. Our overriding question will be: What would YOU do?

What If Heroes Were Not Welcome Home? examines the experiences of American citizens of Japanese descent (second generation Nisei) who were raised on farms in Hood River, Oregon, attended local schools, and worked on their family orchards. During World War II, they served heroically with the United States Armed Forces in the South Pacific and in Europe. Yet their names were blotted from a downtown memorial board honoring local GIs, and they and their family members were discouraged from returning home after the war. This exhibit will ask questions of visitors as they examine photos, statements, letters, and documents that convey varied viewpoints. It includes surprising actions by ordinary citizens, conveying how they spoke out and how their activism made a difference. And it chronicles community events from the past to the present.

TAKAYANAGI MATTHEWS
The U.S. Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) Nisei veterans on November 2, 2011, “in recognition of their exceptional ser-



Full-page newspaper ads discouraged Japanese American veterans and their families from returning to Hood River after World War II. This example was published in the Hood River News on February 2, 1945.

vice, sacrifice and loyalty to America.” A “secret weapon” for Allied Forces in the South Pacific, the unheralded MIS translated Japanese documents and interrogated prisoners of war, serving in every major Pacific campaign and battle. Nicknamed the “Go for Broke” regiment, the 442nd with the incorporated 100th Battalion earned more than 4,000 Purple Hearts, 560 Silver Stars, 7 Presidential Unit Citations, and 21 Medals of Honor. The exhibit of the Congressional Gold Medal at the Oregon Historical Society, the exhibit’s only venue in the Pacific Northwest, will be a rare opportunity to see the medal that is the nation’s highest award for distinguished achievements

Courtesy Hood River News

and contributions honoring individuals, institutions, or events.

As I read Linda’s book, *Nisei Soldiers Break Their Silence: Coming Home to Hood River*, I found the account of the striking of Japanese American soldiers’ names from the American Legion Honor Roll to be reprehensible but not surprising, given the history of prejudice and discrimination against Asians, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the campaign for incarceration of Japanese Americans in camps. It also should not have surprised me that some of the residents of Hood River would not want Japanese Americans to return. But I was amazed to discover that some Hood River residents had gone to such extent publicly to keep Japanese Americans from returning, and offered such poor welcome when they did return. Was it an isolated case? Of course not, but Hood River’s distinction is that it is one of the most notorious.

My immediate family’s experience is different. After achieving early release from the wartime camp, Manzanar in California, my parents went east and attended school, married, and created family and career before returning to the West Coast in 1965. My uncles were in the 442nd, but they returned to Los Angeles after the war; we did not see them often. The experiences of those who returned to the West Coast immediately after the war was not something I thought about. Linda’s book was an eye-opener.

The value of studying history lies in not condemning or praising the actions of others in the past. It is



On November 29, 1944, sixteen local veterans’ names were blotted from the Hood River county memorial board listing 1,600 who had served in the armed forces. All sixteen were Americans of Japanese descent who had grown up in the valley. Businesswoman Arline Moore and Rev. Sherman Burgoyne, leading advocates for restoring Nisei names on the county honor roll, examine the names on the courthouse wall on June 16, 1946.

difficult — impossible — to walk in someone else’s shoes or skin in any era, but value is gained in attempting to understand the context, the conditions, the motivations of individuals and groups. The basic question, “What would you do?” is worth contemplating. The knowledge of where you have been, where you are, and where you are headed is worth having for an individual, a people, and a nation.

Courtesy Homer Yasui