

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

1. INTRODUCTION:

My name is Frank Niwa (given name: Francis). I am a public school teacher, having been in the teaching profession for the past twenty-one years. I am currently teaching in the Renton School District No. 403, Renton, Washington. I am fifty-three years old.

Educational background: I hold a Bachelor's Degree in Music from the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington (1955). I received a Master of Music Degree in Voice from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana in 1958. I also attended Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri; Chicago State College, Chicago, Illinois; Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington; University of Washington and Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington.

Although I do not belong to any community organizations, I did in the past. I was a charter member of the Kiwanis Club of Wood River, Illinois. When my family and I moved to the Chicago area, I became a member of the Kiwanis Club of Blue Island, Illinois. I served this organization as its second vice-president. I was also a member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Wood River, Illinois.

I am married. My wife's name is Diana. We have two sons: Robert, age 15 and William, age 12.

2. PRE-EVACUATION - Tacoma, Washington

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, my mother, brother and I were assisting Dad in making preparations for the morning worship service. Dad was the pastor of the Fawcett Avenue Methodist Church in Tacoma (Today, it is known as the Whitney Memorial United Methodist Church). Suddenly there came the somber news of the Japanese attack on Pearl

Harbor. For a moment we stood in shocked silence. As we looked at each other, there came the question: "What was to happen to us?" We were to learn within the next few months.

What was to follow first began with a curfew. We were to remain within our homes between the hours of 8 P.M. and 6 A.M. As much as we disliked this regulation, we had to comply with it.

Many times during the curfew hours, Dad was called to intercede in behalf of those who were headed for internment camps or detention centers. I do not believe that he was successful in reversing the decisions of those who were responsible for seizing these men.

Sometime during the month of April 1942, signs or placards began to appear on buildings, telephone poles, etc. The poster addressed itself to all persons of Japanese ancestry. We were given approximately two weeks in which to complete the task of selling or renting our homes, selling property, goods, etc. and to move to a type of camp called the War Relocation Center.

Dad and some of his church members converted the church gymnasium into a large storage area. Trucks and cars came in day and night with their cargo of personal belongings. When this task was completed it was almost time to go.

I could recall a very emotional moment I had with twelve other students when we stood on the stage of McCarver Junior High School to receive our diplomas. It was a moment when those in the audience and those on stage could not hold back the tears. Many life-long friendships were about to be broken.

One day in May 1942, we made last minute checks. Dad saw to it that all entrances to the church were locked. The parsonage was to be rented to a Caucasian family. Finally, with worn suitcases and cardboard boxes, we bade farewell to a place we had known for such a short time. Dad was just beginning his second year as the pastor of the Fawcett Avenue Methodist Church. I can still remember how each of us said good-bye to our cat, Lucky. None of us knew that Lucky would be rejected by the tenant, but would remain loyal by staying in the neighborhood during the war years and greet his owners on their return after the War. Incredible but true!

We took a short walk down the hill to the Union Station. There we boarded trains which took us to an area outside of Fresno, California called the Pinedale Assembly Center.

3. PINEDALE ASSEMBLY CENTER - May 1942

How can one really describe his feelings on viewing a prison camp for the first time. It was a shock to see double barbed wire fences with armed guards in watchtowers.

Our living quarters consisted of tar paper covered barracks. Beyond metal frame beds with its straw-filled mattresses, living conditions were at its barest minimum. Washing and toilet facilities were taken care of by a community bathroom with showers.

Each barrack was divided into rooms, with one family occupying a room depending on their size. The only way to have any degree of privacy was to partition the room by tying a heavy piece of string from one side of the room to the other with a large sheet or bed-spread type material draped over the string.

Despite the obvious inconveniences, our family managed to our best under rather trying circumstances.

On the recreational side of life, we had many sandlot games in various part of the center. As I recall, movies were also available, but not current ones.

It is difficult to say how well we adjusted to camp life. After all, Pinedale Assembly Center was only a temporary site. The permanent prison camp was about to be occupied.

4. TULE LAKE WAR RELOCATION CENTER - Newell, California - August 1942

The train ride to Northern California was uneventful. My brother who had an active interest in the sciences wanted to learn if the lizard of Southern California could adapt itself to the climate near the California-Oregon border. He carried twenty-four lizards in a well-built wooden-wire cage. They could not adapt themselves to the change of climate and mercifully passed on to a higher form of life.

Arrival at Tule Lake took on a more ominous tone. The double barbed wire fence was there. And the watchtowers with their armed guards stood like giant Goliaths over-looking the vanquished ones. It was quite a feeling to realize that this prison camp located in the middle of a "desert", with miles and miles of sage brush and sand, never-ending dust storms, its ever-present scorpions and rattlesnakes and many other inconveniences of life was going to be home--a home to many for a considerable length of time.

Moving into tar paper roof barracks with its tar covered floors, metal bar frame beds with a little better quality mattress and not one piece of furniture, we were ready to begin life in this our permanent prison camp.

Church services were held for persons of different religious faiths. Movies were shown on a regular basis in the community dining room. Ball teams were organized with an American League and National League. It was operated on the same basis as the majors on the outside. I recall the day that a semi-professional ball team from nearby Klamath Falls, Oregon, challenged our camp all stars team composed of players from both leagues to an exhibition game. After thirty-eight years, I could still recall the score: Tule Lake All Stars: 16 - Klamath Falls: 0. How sweet was the victory!

Since we came to Tule Lake with no furniture, a lumber company from either Newell, California, or Klamath Falls donated scrap pieces of lumber to the residents of Tule Lake. Whether they did this in each block, I cannot say. However, I do remember seeing a truck pull into our block and unload its cargo on the ground. Naturally there was a mad scramble. Dad, assuming his role as the "Big Carpenter", did a magnificent job of building a table and two park type benches. This was to serve as our furniture for almost one year.

As the fall of 1942 came, so came school. Teachers from the outside as well as those from within began the task of continuing the education of its prison children. Into the first month of school, there was a labor shortage on the farms surrounding the camp. There was a ready market of workers: the school children. School was closed. For the next six weeks, we worked on farms picking vegetables especially potatoes. At the end of six weeks, we received our pay: \$5.00. Five dollars for six weeks of work at approximately eight to ten hours a day. One can imagine the tremendous feeling of bitterness that arose!

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Frank Niwa - ADDITIONS - August 31, 1981

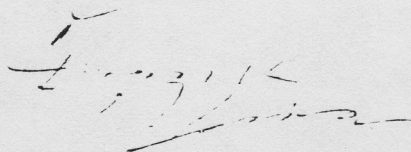
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During the summer, the weather was hot--sometimes terribly hot. There was no shade. There was no place to swim. I could remember an irrigation ditch-type place in one part of the camp. It was not large enough to accommodate many people. But those who sat in the water could feel the coolness in the hot, dry air of desert Northern California that is, if you didn't mind the green scum in the water. Oh, how we longed for the sight of the rivers, streams, lakes and the ocean. Would we ever see them again?

As life went on in the prison camp, there were many things that we missed, especially ice cream. I could remember one day when the word spread around that an ice cream truck was in camp. Eventually a long line formed. After several hours of standing in the heat of the day, I finally made it to the front of the line only to find that the ice cream consisted of a nearly melted bar, melted so that it formed a large pool inside the wrapping. I ate it despite its gooey appearance.

As the war progressed, many of our boys wanted and did volunteer for the Army. Feelings were running quite high among those who felt indifferent about joining the Army and fighting for the United States. During daylight hours, there were reported beatings against those who tried to join the Army. Consequently, many boys had to crawl on their stomachs through sand at night to the Administration Building in order to volunteer for the Army.

Tensions got so high that dissidents in one block tried to forcibly prevent its young people from going to the Administration Building. A company of soldiers came in, surrounded the entire block and drove every man out at the point of a bayonet, loaded them onto 2½ ton trucks and took them away. It was a shocking sight to witness.



Winter was cold. Nearby Castle Rock Mountain offered opportunities for winter activities. The camp administration decided to allow us to toboggan and bob-sled on the mountain. Again, we put donated lumber to good use by building our own equipment.

Fortunately, camp life did not affect our family relations. We were a very close family and continued to remain so during our stay at Tule Lake. Despite the availability of school, sports activities, movies, there was still something missing--the longing to live the life of a free American!

If I were to recall a single event that occurred in camp that had a great impact, it would be this. During the spring of 1943 on Easter morning we recreated the "Road to Calvary" by dragging a huge cross through the gates of the camp, along the desert sands and up Castle Rock Mountain. Close to the edge, the cross, painted white, was raised and firmly secured. As each day, week and month went by, that white cross "on a hill far away" became a symbol of hope to many of us--a hope that one day we would be freed!

5. ONE YEAR LATER - Tule Lake War Relocation Center.

Dad wanted to get us out of camp. Although he was an ordained United Methodist minister, he knew that it would be impossible to be appointed to a church outside of the camp. Therefore, he applied for and subsequently was accepted as a Civil Affairs Language Instructor at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. We were going to be freed! The day of the happening was a joyous moment!

6. FREEDOM - Evanston, Illinois - Summer 1943.

How does one describe the exhilarating feeling of being free from life behind barbed wire? How can one forget coming into the camp for the

first time; the feeling of despair the first night in the barracks; working for six weeks on farms and receiving so little pay; the dust storms; the feeling of hope day in and day out; the feeling of not being able to achieve a single goal while being imprisoned!

It was a wonderful feeling to be a free American once again!

Dad's first year as an instructor at Northwestern University was a success. His pupils consisted of officers of the U. S. Army, Navy and Marines. We became members of the internationally renowned First United Methodist Church and were not only accepted by the church but also totally accepted into the community. Assimilation into the student body of Evanston Township High School was without incident. After one year in Evanston, Dad was transferred to the University of Chicago. The transition from one community to another went smoothly. We did not encounter one word or act of racial prejudice during our two years in the Midwest.

7. THE SUMMER OF 1945 - VJ Day - Homeward Bound

The War was over. We packed our belongings and started on the long journey to the Pacific Northwest. What an empty feeling we had as Dad unlocked the door to the home that we left over three years ago. This was the house that we had to leave at the outbreak of the War in the Pacific.

It was good to be back home!

8. POST EVACUATION THOUGHTS

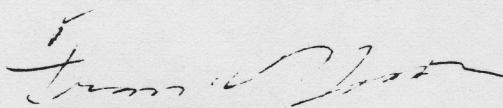
As far as overcoming difficult problems in the Midwest, there were none. We were totally accepted into the community, church and schools.

The World War II incarceration has affected my life. To this day, I still cannot overcome the feeling that my family and I were wrongfully imprisoned.

One day, during my first three years of teaching, I was asked to take over a high school class in Problems in American Democracy. I was asked to tell of my experiences at the Pinedale Assembly Center and the Tule Lake War Relocation Center. I looked at the student textbook and discovered one short paragraph dealing with the evacuation. When the question was asked as to the reasons for and the justification of the evacuation, it was a question I could not answer. I suppose that this unanswered question will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The final thought: Not much has been said about the Issei. I believe that we owe them a debt of gratitude for being at our side when we needed them!

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Frank Niwa', is written above the printed name.

FRANK NIWA
August 17, 1981