

Remembrance Day 2015

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for The Japanese Presence Project

Vashon Island once had a vibrant Japanese community that was deeply involved in the life of the community. Japanese islanders owned and operated over twenty farms on the island, owned the largest berry barreling plant on the island, and provided jobs for hundreds of islanders and off-islanders picking and processing crops. This Japanese community supported the schools, provided a number of valedictorians and salutatorians for the graduating high school classes, provided sports team players for the winning high school basketball, football, and track teams, donated 100 cherry trees to landscape the new Vashon High School in 1931, were founders of the Sportsman's Club, were members of the Businessmen's Club, and help raise funds for numerous school projects with Japanese performances and dances.

There were 142 Japanese residents of Vashon in 1930, and even though the Great Depression reduced that number slightly to 130 in 1940, the Japanese on Vashon were an important part of the island community. World War Two effectively destroyed Vashon's Japanese community and only about 40 Japanese returned after the War to pick up their lives and resume the lives the War had interrupted. What caused the destruction of this Vashon community and Japanese communities all along the West Coasts was Executive Order 9066 signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. This Executive Order authorized the forced removal and incarceration of all Japanese in what was called the West Coast Exclusion Zone. Over 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were imprisoned, without trial, in guarded, barbed wire enclosures - American concentration camps. All of the Vashon Japanese, except for those who voluntarily exiled before the removal, were evacuated, sent to Pinedale Processing Center in California, and eventually sent to six of the nine Relocation Camps set up by the War Relocation Administration.

The reaction to this removal and imprisonment on Vashon, like most things Vashon, was mixed. On May 16, 1942 when the Vashon Japanese were evacuated, over 300 fellow Islanders came to the North End Ferry Dock to say goodbye. Many islanders kept in touch with the evacuees during the war, and some managed Japanese farms during their owner's absence. But, at the same time, the *Vashon New Record* printed heavily biased and even blatantly racist commentaries throughout the War. And, in early 1945, a young man, who did not want the Japanese to return to the island, burned three Japanese homes. Included in these homes was the home of the Miyoshi family, who had stored all their possessions in the house, and who, at the time their house was burned, had two sons fighting in Europe with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Vashon's reaction to the removal and imprisonment was not all regrets for friends gone, but also included some viciously racist responses.



Tomorrow, February 19, as we consider Remembrance Day 2015, let us all take a moment to reflect upon what fear and racism can do to a community. Frank Fujii's logo for Remembrance Day 1978 is an important reminder to us all. It represents the Japanese symbols for first, second, and third to remember the three generations of Japanese evacuated. These symbols are enclosed within a barbed wire entangled circle representing the barbed wire topped prison fences that imprisoned these three generations. A vital Japanese community on Vashon was destroyed because of fear and racism. Let us be aware and committed to never letting this happen again to any fellow islanders no matter what our differences.

Joe Okimoto is a resident of Vashon and was imprisoned as a young boy during the WW II removal at Posten Relocation Camp.

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