

A Day of Remembrance 2014

By Bruce Haulman

President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared Dec. 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked, “a date which will live in infamy.” But there is another, lesser known date that also lives in infamy because the two days are inexorably linked. The first led directly to the second. What few of us know, is that Feb. 19, 1942 — 72 years ago today — is the day that President Roosevelt signed an executive order that authorized the forced removal and incarceration of all Japanese in what was called the West Coast Exclusion Zone. More than 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were imprisoned, without trial, in guarded, barbed wire enclosures — American concentration camps.

For Vashon Island, May 16, 1942, was the day that this order took effect. 126 Vashon residents of Japanese ancestry were assembled at what is now Ober Park, loaded onto trucks guarded by armed soldiers, taken onto a special ferry at the north end, taken to Fauntleroy, loaded onto trucks that delivered them to the King Street Station, and placed on a train with curtained windows that took them to Pinedale, Calif. Hundreds of their fellow Islanders came to the ferry dock to say goodbye. The exiled Japanese spent over two months at Pinedale Assembly Center being processed before being sent primarily to “relocation camps.” Roosevelt called them concentration camps at a time, before the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps were widely known, and they are now called American concentration camps to distinguish them from the common association of the term with the Holocaust.

Photo Below - The Tsuto Otsuka family of Vashon Island interned at Heart Mountain Relocation Camp in Wyoming. In 1943, there were 10,767 Japanese imprisoned at Heart Mountain, close to the number of 10,624 residents of Vashon-Maury Island in the 2010 census. Photo courtesy of the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum.



The West Coast Exclusion Zone was only a narrow strip along the West Coast and in Washington state followed the crest of the Cascades. Thus if you were Japanese living in Enumclaw, Vashon or Port Townsend, or anywhere west of the mountains, you were imprisoned, but if you lived in Yakima, Spokane or Winthrop, or anywhere east of the mountains, you were not. Some Japanese who learned of the coming internment and had family east of the mountains, chose to go into voluntary exile. Some Vashon Japanese chose this alternative.

The Japanese were an important and vital part of the Vashon community at this time and both they and the community reached out to one another before they were forced to leave. The Japanese Boy Scouts were given the Troop 495 flag so they could form a branch troop when they were resettled. The Vashon Japanese-American Club published the "Creed of the Japanese-Americans," which pledged support to America. Japanese-American students at Vashon High School organized a plan to support the war effort. Agnes Smock, editor of the *Vashon Island News-Record*, asked Islanders to respect their Japanese neighbors, and Vashon High School faculty asked students for tolerance of their Japanese classmates.



Photo Above - The funeral of Kengo Yorioka, 1938, held at The Island Club, the former Vashon School located where Ober Park is today. Photo courtesy of the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum.

In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Executive Order 9066, which imprisoned American citizens without trial and without justifiable cause, in the case of *Korematsu vs. the United States*. The court upheld Fred Korematsu's guilty conviction for defying the internment order. Justice Antonio Scalia, speaking to law students at the University of Hawaii earlier this month, warned "Of course it was wrong ... we have repudiated it in a later case. But you are kidding yourself if you think that such a thing will not happen again. In times of war, the laws fall silent ..."

On this day of remembrance, it is important for us all to recognize what a society, even a democratic society, can do in a crisis when fear rules. As Thomas Jefferson so wisely cautioned us: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." We must be eternally vigilant, we must not be silent, we must not allow our laws to fall silent, and we must not allow fear to control our decisions. We must safeguard the rights of everyone, even those we fear.

— Bruce Haulman is an island historian