

Some Childhood Internment Remembrances

After the Pearl Harbor attack I remembered how very scary it was for my parents and me, at age 8, to wonder what would happen to us and my two younger brothers. But it was scary, of course, for everyone in those times of panic after December 7, 1941.

What happened to us with a Japanese heritage and American citizenship was wartime internment under presidential order no. 1066. I had to leave grammar school and my third grade classmates.

I remember my first train ride April, 1942 when our family was taken from our home in San Francisco to an initial internment camp near Los Angeles. This was the Santa Anita Assembly Center which was on the grounds of a horse racing track. Our family was assigned to stay in a horse stall smelling of horse manure. We slept on mattresses stuffed with hay. To bathe some of us used a big shower room which was formerly used to wash race horses. My mother cried.

I very well remember once sitting outside the horse stalls to air out our beds. For me it was a great moment for a family friend took me aside and showed me how the entire multiplication tables worked by progression without the need for rote memorization. In our temporary school which was set up for the children I skipped to the fourth grade.

We ate with many others in a big mess hall in the grandstands which I remember as being very noisy. I also remember the sound of a pick-up orchestra loudly practicing Beethoven's fifth symphony (ta-ta-ta Dum) echoing under the grandstands..

I remember the statue of the famous racing horse, Seabiscuit, in front of the grandstands. From the top of the grandstands there were camouflage nets being made. I remember running around the race track on the soft

ground pretending we were horses in a race.

I remember being told my uncle in the army stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas tried to visit us at Santa Anita. But he was taken off his train and jailed in Victorville before being sent back.

In September, 1942 with my second long train trip we were taken to an isolated place in Wyoming called Heart Mountain Relocation Center. The closest large town was Cody with Yellowstone Park many miles to the west. There we lived in a barrack altogether in one family room. We ate again in a mess hall and used central bathrooms.

It was for children like me actually a happy time if not for our parents. It was fun. We played a lot of sports in the summer and fall like baseball and football. In the very cold Wyoming winter we ice skated and had snowball fights involving dozens on each side. We dug secret tunnels in the ground for hiding places. Some of us hunted and captured rattlesnakes to look at inches away in containers at a make-shift natural history museum. We saw weekly movies like Laurel and Hardy. At Sunday School I remember being chosen to lead the choir for "Silent Night". Though not for me at age 8, there was a boy scout troop in which Norman Mineta (once Transportation Secretary) met Senator Simpson when they were young.

I did belong to a youth club called the "Black Panthers." Our leader was a young adult. He later joined the army and was killed in Italy while leading his platoon. When I heard this I was very sad.

School was strict. At those times in the 1940's some teachers still made students who made bad mistakes wear a dunce cap in the corner of the school room. Some teachers with the back of a ruler rapped the hands of some students.

My mother did not like the overall environment of "camp" as the internment centers were called by the internees. We left in May, 1943 for Denver, Colorado. There my

parents rented a house in a Jewish neighborhood which left a great impression on me. I remember many things like my grammar school classes being almost empty, except for "gentiles," during the high Jewish holidays. On Saturdays while waiting at a synagogue for my friends I would listen under a window with rapture to the cantors. On Saturdays I earned as much as a quarter as a gentile called into Jewish homes to light a stove with a match. I very much wanted to wear a colorful yarmulke like my childhood buddies.

We returned home to San Francisco late in 1945 and I remember VJ day celebrations ending WWII. I remember how much help and support my parents received from old friends and neighbors upon our return.

The internment of those of Japanese descent after Pearl Harbor can be understandable given the hysteria of that time.

In that initial time of turmoil I remember any apprehensions I may have had were put to rest by my parents. They were protective of me and my brothers just as other parents were of their children. And as the wartime months and years went by for children like me, things returned to a normalcy as we grew up even if our surroundings were in an internment camp. As children we did participate in a small part of history. And luckily it was fun.

Phil Miyamoto,
born 1933

Eulogy Text for Asaye Mae Miyamoto

She lived a long active life of 97 years ending two-and-a-half weeks ago on December 22, 2004.

Asaye Miyamoto, was born on May 16, 1907 in Cloverdale, California, where her parents retreated after San Francisco's Earthquake and Fire of 1906. Later on when she started school, she took on the name Mae since that was the month of her birth. Through the years, many knew her as Mae or Auntie Mae. I knew her as Grandma.

Much happened in the long years since her birth.

In those 97 years new, modern inventions were developed and the world constantly changed. Some technological innovations were utilized by Grandma through her life, others were not. The telephone was by far the most important in Grandma's life. In her room at Danny's rest home where she last lived, Grandma's portable phone was used often to talk to friends & family near and far.

In Grandma's full life of 97 years, she grew up in Sebastopol with her parents and many brothers and sisters. As a very young child Grandma remembered visiting the Pan Pacific Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco.

She remembered the influenza epidemic of 1918 when everyone but her father was sick in bed and one of her sisters died. Four years later another sister tragically died in a boarding school fire. This left her six siblings, Shina, Seda, twins Noburu and Minori (later known as John and Joe), George and Alice. Regardless of the hardships, there were bright spots. In her teens she used a manual Remington typewriter to write prize-winning newspaper essays. Grandma once told me of this time in her life that *"All in all it was quite hard for my parents because of the language barrier and large size of my family, but father always managed somehow to make enough so that we were never destitute, and we grew up a very happy family."* Grandma's brothers and sisters are all now gone, but the spirit of happiness still lives on in the Miyamoto family.

In Grandma's full life of 97 years, she moved to San Francisco after the Great Depression of 1929. She remembered working for \$75 a month as a sales clerk in a Japanese art gift shop on Grant Avenue. One customer was the famous child prodigy, the violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

In San Francisco she had a very short career on radio. She was the girl friend on the Frank Watanabe Comedy show. It was broadcast live on radio station KFRC from the Furniture Mart on Market Street.

She formed lasting friendships living at the San Francisco YWCA on Sutter Street. As a member of the YWCA "Golden Echos" there were excursions across the Golden Gate by ferry boat and then by train to the top of Mount Tamalpais for picnics, or for canoeing on the Russian River. There were dances with college men at Stanford and Cal Berkeley at Euclid Hall.

There were many admirers of Grandma.

But the admirer that won Grandma's hand was Joe Miyamoto. They were married in 1932. They enjoyed a romantic honeymoon during Christmastime in the snow at Yosemite Lodge.

Grandma's full life of 97 years included the difficult depression years in which three sons were born, in 1933 my father Philip, and my uncle Don in 1936 and uncle Keith in 1940. Their first home, just four blocks from this church on Clement Street, was a dark basement apartment renting for \$15 a month.

In those difficult years a dry cleaning business was established on Washington Street called Eagle Cleaners, and became quite a success. As reported in Herb Caen's column, telephone calls were made to the dry cleaning shop asking how much it cost to clean an eagle.

In Grandma's full life of 97 years there were terrible wars and awful conflicts. But it was World War II that greatly touched her life as it did for many others.

On Sunday December 7, 1941 Grandpa was decorating the window of Eagle Cleaners for Christmas. A neighbor came by with news on the radio that the Japanese bombed a place in Hawaii called Pearl Harbor. Not then taking the news seriously, Grandma said she nonchalantly drove downtown with her two older sons to see the Christmas window decorations of department stores like the Emporium.

With all the excitement downtown Grandma said she then realized the news of the Japanese attack was true. Hastily they got back into the family Chevrolet and drove back. Driving down Post Street in Nihonmachi she recalled there were many policemen present.

With all the fear and uncertainty after war was declared, Grandma was a very strong force of calmness.

In the months before April, 1942 when the family was to be evacuated from San Francisco she made sure their regular poker games with friends continued. When air raid sirens went off at night, in the living quarters in

back of the cleaners the blackout curtains were drawn down tightly and the poker games continued with candles.

Before the internment, Mr. Abel Siegel drove the family in his truck to the evacuation collection point on Van Ness Avenue. He owned the small corner grocery store near the cleaners. In that time of war hysteria Mr. Siegel was one of many neighbors and customers who were kind to Grandma and the family.

Grandma particularly treasured a photograph published in the Examiner of Keith during this time. Her 2-year-old son is shown waiving goodbye just before leaving on bus and train to an assembly center near Los Angeles.

Taken by train to the assembly center which was the Santa Anita race track, the family was actually housed in smelly horse stalls with sacks to be filled with straw for a mattresses. Horse manure was scrapped off the sides of the horse stalls. Bathing took place in an open building where horses were showered. ### She had cause to be despondent. ### However, Grandma was steadfast and strong in the evacuation and internment.

Conditions at the relocation center at Heart Mountain near Cody, Wyoming were a little better. There were armed sentinels in watchtowers. barbed

wire, and rows of tar-paper barracks isolated and surrounded with desert sage brush and rattlesnakes.

The family lived in a large room with a small coal stove for the cold winters of 1942 and 1943. Furniture was fashioned with scrap lumber and the room partitioned off and decorated by Grandma to off-set the dreary bare walls and windows.

While there were travails for Grandma in caring for her family she formed many lasting friendships during those upheavals of the war. There were also reasons to be proud. Her brothers John and George were in the Army.

George and Grandma's brother-in-law Mitch were to see combat earning medals as infantrymen in Italy and France with the 442nd Regiment.

Grandma was a strong tenacious woman.

After release from Heart Mountain to Denver it was Grandma who doggedly found jobs and a house to rent large enough for the family and some relatives. And on return to San Francisco, it was again Grandma with her doggedness, despite an acute housing shortage, who searched and found a place to live on Sacramento Street. There she was again instrumental in again establishing another dry cleaning business, Spruce Cleaners. . Her

brothers-in-law, Roy, Mitch and Shig, were also given help and support in settling down in post-war San Francisco.

Grandma continued her active life back in San Francisco.

Her three sons were guided by her through their difficult teenage years.

She sent them to Pine Methodist Sunday school when Reverend Wake was then the young pastor. She supported their Boy Scout activities in troops 25 and 14. She made sure they maintained high scholarship at Washington High School. She once told me that she was very proud that her three sons have had successful careers and lives.

Grandma's life was busy.

The family spent summer vacations camping at Mt. Lassen and Yosemite, visiting Disneyland and Canada, or enjoying the beach at Santa Cruz.

Grandma also traveled world-wide with friends and others. Through her 97 years she visited such places as Europe, Japan, Hawaii and more exotic places like Morocco, Egypt or Turkey. One of my favorite pictures of Grandma is of her atop a camel in the middle of the desert.

Closer to home, there were many picnics and fishing trips for striped bass in the delta. There were New Year's Eve JACL dances. And she continued for

many years the tradition of Oshogatsu at which time as "Auntie" Mae she would often be surrounded by many of her 17 nieces and nephews.

****** There was never a quiet moment in grandma's life.

She pursued Japanese doll making and Ikebana. She was a voracious reader of magazines like the Reader's Digest and the old Saturday Evening Post and books by Agatha Christie, Mary Wiggins Clarke and Danielle Steele. She finished crossword puzzles quickly with ball-point ink. In her room at Danny's she watched favorite programs like Jeopardy and every ice skating show scheduled on her TV Guide.

And with friends she very much enjoyed playing card games like the Japanese card game Hana, seven-card stud poker, **##** and especially bridge with her many, many bridge friends.

Sadly, in the few days before her passing Grandma was not to play the regularly scheduled Tuesday and Thursday bridge games with Rosalie, Miyo and Masako.

Yes, Grandma did live a long and active life to the end of her 97 years.

She was loving and generous. She was tough and tenacious.

Passive she was not.

She was a strong, steady and vital force.

Her passing has left a void in all our lives.

Goodbye, Grandma.

May God Bless you