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On December 7th, 1941, Tosh Okamoto was spreading chicken manure on his family’s farm when his sister, AKI, came running out. She told him that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

“I did not know where Pearl Harbor was but had an ominous feeling about our future,” he said.

Toshikaro Okamoto was born in Seattle, Washington, to Juhei and Sugie Okamoto in 1926. It was his father’s second marriage, and Okamoto had two half-brothers and two half-sisters as well as two sisters and one brother. His older half-siblings were “kibetsu,” having been educated in Japan.

When the Great Depression hit, Okamoto’s father lost his job, and became a farm laborer. His father tried to save money despite financial hardships and, when Okamoto was in high school, his father was able to lease a farm of his own.

When he wasn’t in school, Okamoto worked on the farm and drove his father to the farmer’s market where they sold their produce. Just a few months later, he watched Japanese Americans from within the city of Seattle being transported to the Puyallup Fairgrounds and knew that he would follow them soon. His family tried to sell their farm equipment. “Our neighbor bought our truck for practically nothing, and that was the only item we sold,” he said.

Much of the rest was stolen by thieves.

Okamoto remembers boarding the train with his family, with the blinds of the windows drawn shut and no knowledge of their destination. As the weather grew hotter, they knew they were heading south. Finally, they arrived at Pinedale Assembly Center, in Fresno, California. “The temporary barracks had asphalt floors,” said Okamoto. “The army coats with steel legs sank into the asphalt. Most evacuees had diarrhea at one time or another. Our barracks was near a lime mine with inadequate systems and the smell was unbearable.”

That fall, the family was transferred to Tule Lake. Okamoto got a job shoveling coal from railroad cars. Soon after their arrival, Okamoto’s father had a heart attack, so his oldest half-brother became the head of the family.

“He told me not to sign the loyalty oath,” Okamoto said. His half-brother had been raised in Japan, but Okamoto had spent his entire life in this country. Okamoto’s mother also tried to convince him not to answer “yes” to questions 27 and 28 on the loyalty questionnaire, out of fear that he would be drafted to fight in the war. Okamoto’s father and his older sister sided with him. He answered “yes” to both questions. When the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was formed, Okamoto wanted to enlist but his mother asked him not to because his father wouldn’t be able to provide for his family.

Those who had answered “yes” were sent to other confinement sites as Tule Lake was too house those deemed “disloyal.” Okamoto’s sister, mother, father and mother were assigned to Minidoka. But his father was still weak and unable to travel. By the time he could be moved, Minidoka was full, and the family instead left for Heart Mountain.

At Heart Mountain, Okamoto heard about a new resistance movement, the Fair Play Committee. Okamoto was intrigued because one of its leaders, Kiyoshi Okamoto, shared his last name. The Fair Play Committee felt that Nisei should protest because one of its leaders, Kiyoshi Okamoto had two half-brothers and one of his fathers had fought in the Pacific Theater. He was the first minority hired by the department, and faced mistreatment from some of the firefighters who had fought in the Pacific Theater. He was eventually accepted when they learned that he too was a U.S. Veteran. In the course of his 32 years there, he was eventually promoted to the post of Supervisor.

Okamoto also worked to create assisted living opportunities for Nikkei in the Seattle area since hearing that Jasti were not receiving adequate treatment due to language barriers. He is one of the founding board members of Nikkei Concerns, which established the Seattle Keiro Nursing Home, the Manzanar Man’s Assisted Living Facility, and the KokoKo Kai Day Care and Nikkei Heritage education and wellness programs. He also served as a director for the Kobe House, a not-for-profit that provides elderly housing with culturally sensitive programs and services in Seattle.

In June 1945, 43 young men were tried in a Cheyenne Court Room by Judge T. Blake Kennedy. On the first day of the trial, Judge Kennedy addressed the defendants as “you jap boys.” After a short trial, all were sentenced to three years in jail. In June 2014, 150 judges from across the country gathered in Cody, Wyo. Four out of five of the Wyoming State Supreme Court Judges were in attendance, as were local District Judge Steven Cranfill and Chief Judge John St. Clair of Wyoming’s Shoshone and Arapaho Tribal Court.

Over the course of the conference, attendees learned about the injustices faced by the Japanese American community during World War II and about the legal questions at hand. Keynote speakers were Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, a former internee who went on to become U.S. Secretary of Commerce and “Transportation; Senator Alan K. Simpson, who attended Boy Scout jambores at Heart Mountain and later served as U.S. Senator for Wyoming; and Judge Lance A. Ito, whose parents were incarcerated at Heart Mountain and is now a Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge.

Seventy years after Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee members were condemned in the largest mass trial in Wyoming history, the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation (HMWF) hosted a reenactment of their trial for the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts Annual Meeting.

In early 1944, the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee decreed that members would not comply with the draft until their rights and family’s rights were restored. Nonetheless, members had to be willing to fight for this country if their rights were restored and anybody who had answered “no” to questions 27–28 on the loyalty questionnaire was not permitted to join. Members did not comply with their draft notices and were subsequently arrested.

In June 1944, Okamoto found jobs working outside the camp to support his family instead of his next appearance in court. In June, 1944. Okamoto returned to Heart Mountain for the 2014 Pilgrimage, on August 22, 2014. That weekend, visited the Interpretive Center, saw the unveiling of the newly-restored Heart Mountain’s Memorial Wall, and heard his name announced. He spoke in a panel discussion about his experience during World War II, along with James Iso and Yoji Morishita, two other World War II veterans from Heart Mountain.

Now, nearly seventy years have passed since Heart Mountain—first in a lumber mill near Cody, then as a carpenter. Finally, he and a friend found work in a defense power plant in Columbus, Ohio, and left Heart Mountain for good.