

Chapter 2: 1941-1945

“Japanese Americans at Whitworth during WW II”

The next major chapter in Whitworth’s history of race occurred during World War II. Amidst a national atmosphere of fear and often hate for people of Japanese descent, Whitworth College initiated a policy to bring nearly two dozen Japanese Americans to its campus during the war. The recruitment and general treatment of those students remains one of the most significant administrative decisions regarding race relations in the history of the institution. Whitworth’s president, Frank Warren, deserves the great majority of the credit for what was clearly a courageous decision.¹

When war broke out in December 1941, Frank Warren had been president for little more than a year. Previously he had served as dean of the school of religion at Seattle Pacific College. At the time of his hire at Whitworth, the college was struggling to stabilize itself after a decade-long economic depression. Warren, a charismatic evangelical leader, had served as a missionary to Japan during the 1920s and developed a strong affection for Japanese people and their culture. When Pearl Harbor thrust the United States into war, Warren felt shock, but also expressed concern regarding the likely impact on persons of Japanese descent in this country.

Whitworth's new president addressed the student body directly, but he also spoke to the larger Spokane community through his weekly radio broadcast. Warren wanted to calm students and, in particular, he wanted to try to minimize any impulse toward hating the Japanese people. The West Coast, after all, had exhibited a long history of racism toward Asian peoples.

Warren's efforts to minimize inclinations toward hate first appeared six months after Pearl Harbor in a radio address entitled "Tragedy in the Pacific." Now removed from the immediate shock and aftermath of the bombing at Pearl Harbor, Warren provided his audience with a condensed history of Japan and factors that had led to the attack against the United States. And while Warren stated confidently that the United States would prevail, he turned his attention to what he believed was excessive vilification of the Japanese people and Japanese Americans:

The gospel of hate is spreading through our nation and until that is gone, we are not ready for peace. I plead this morning for sanity and tolerance as we wage this awful war.

Against a far-flung endeavor to engender hate of our enemies, I must take my stand this morning. . . . For the day is coming, and may it dawn soon, when we shall have to live at peace in a world where Germany and Italy and Japan will still exist. That can never be if always we must look upon them with hate and suspicion. We are not fighting the people, the culture, the civilization of these nations. We are fighting to a bitter finish, rank, selfish, sinful militarism which could lead a nation of 70 million people and a world into war. That must be exterminated from the earth. In the place of it, the Christian concept of life, the Christian philosophy of life, and above all else, the international Christ must be so planted in the life of America, of England, of Germany, of Japan, that never again shall selfishness rule the world, for selfishness breeds war and war must cease. Then shall there be peace in the Pacific!²

As the war progressed, Warren's Christian beliefs and his compassion for Japanese Americans combined with events on the West Coast shaped Whitworth's response to the war. Significant events paved the way to Whitworth's unusual commitment to recruiting Japanese American students from the West Coast. In February 1942, Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 requiring all persons of Japanese descent to leave the Pacific Coast. Between 110,000 and 120,000 individuals, of whom approximately 70,000 were citizens, were first evacuated to relocation camps and then incarcerated in internment camps in the West. Included in this order were approximately 5,500 students attending West Coast colleges and universities.³

The first Japanese American student to transfer to Whitworth from a West Coast college was Sei Yamada. In May 1942, two months after Roosevelt's executive order, Yamada announced that he was coming from Pacific Lutheran College in Tacoma. Previous to Yamada's transfer, Whitworth had enrolled only a handful of Japanese American students in its history, but Yamada's matriculation became crucial to the future acceptance of students of Japanese descent.

Yamada, who proved to be a popular student, played football, ran track, and participated in baseball. Although the exact circumstances under which Yamada chose to come to Whitworth are uncertain, as is any role that Frank Warren may have played, Yamada's success made it easier for Warren to open Whitworth's doors to more college students of Japanese descent.

By December 1942, the War Department had approved 344 colleges, including Whitworth, to enroll Japanese American students. Nevertheless, the prospect of bringing more Japanese Americans to Whitworth required no small measure of courage on Warren's part. Trustee minutes do not reveal specific conversations regarding the decision, and perhaps he did not present it for discussion. However, Spokane was hardly a hospitable place for the relocation

of Japanese from the coast. While Japanese people already living in the city were not forced to relocate, Spokane, perhaps mandated by the federal government, imposed a nightly curfew. In addition, the FBI investigated every Japanese person living within the city, and the local chapter of the American Legion vigorously opposed the relocation of persons of Japanese descent to the Spokane area.⁴

Nevertheless, Japanese American students began coming to Whitworth during the 1942-43 school year. By 1944, there were approximately twenty enrolled, roughly 10% of the total student body of 200. Several Japanese-American students became particularly influential and well known across campus during their time at Whitworth. As indicated earlier, Seichi (Sei) Yamada stood out for his outgoing personality and many talents. He had played football at Pacific Lutheran and had been active on a judo team. Years later, Yamada shared that the United States government sponsored a judo team trip to Japan in the fall of 1941, shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Yamada and others from the judo team were instructed to remember everything they could—in essence to conduct low-level spying while in Japan. It is unclear whether he was able to gather any useful information.⁵

Another student with an interesting story is Heidi Horikawa. She had been on the debate team at the University of Washington when she was forced to leave school. Heidi was placed with a Quaker woman, probably with the American Friends Service Committee, and then found herself at Whitworth. She remembered the irony of going to a college that many members of the military were also attending. “We would stand in the hallway and wait till they marched in or out.” She remembered attending Youth for Christ rallies in downtown Spokane; that is when she

accepted Christ as her savior. She became popular enough to have her wedding plans with Tom Kitayama featured in the *Whitworthian*.⁶

Still another Japanese-American student who made an impact on the Whitworth campus was Sadao (better known as Corky) Kuroiwa. He had spent his first two years at Gonzaga and then transferred to Whitworth where he played basketball. In 1945, the *Whitworthian* featured his photograph and described him as “one of the most popular and one of the better players on this year’s squad.” He won the Pierette Inspiration Award for 1944-45 but left school for the army where he likely served in the all Japanese American 442nd regimental battalion.⁷

Generally, Japanese American students of that era reported that their time interacting with other Whitworth students was positive. Ellen Hasagawa remembered her campus experience this way: “They had a lot of nice people there. I just wondered sometimes how sincere were they? . . . I’d get that feeling. . . . You know, because of course, we stood out as a group . . .but then, we all had a good time.”⁸

Perhaps the Whitworth student who best epitomized the tragedy of the Japanese American experience on the West Coast was Tom Haji. The youngest of three children, Haji was born in 1925 in Bluestem, Washington, a small town 25 miles west of Spokane. His parents were Japanese immigrants and his father worked for the Great Northern Railroad. In 1933 the Hajis moved first to Skykomish, Washington and then to Monroe, where Tom and his sisters attended both elementary school and high school. They were well known in Monroe where Tom became a noted basketball player. After Pearl Harbor, Tom’s father was accused anonymously of sabotaging the railroad without proof. The Hajis were forcibly evacuated to Tule Lake internment camp in northern California. By June 1943, the Haji family convinced the

government that they were good citizens; they left camp and moved to Spokane. It was then that Tom enrolled at Whitworth during the fall of 1943. He joined the basketball team, which consisted at that time of ten players, five of whom were Japanese American. In addition to Haji, George Yamamoto, Tomi Terao, Bert Kimura, and Sadao “Corkey” Kuroiwa all played for Whitworth.⁹

Haji majored in pre-engineering and worked on the student newspaper. However, in 1944 he either was drafted or volunteered to fight in the all Japanese American 442nd regiment, which became the most decorated single regiment in the American army. Known for the phrase “Go-For-Broke,” the regiment was often involved in some of the most dangerous operations in the European theater. Sadly, Tom Haji was killed in April 1945, a month before the end of the war in Italy.¹⁰

Clearly Warren’s compassion for students of Japanese descent, as well as his outspoken views regarding the incompatibility of racism with Christianity, make this a noteworthy episode in Whitworth’s larger history.

One additional story about Warren’s role with Japanese Americans who were interned is worth noting. Sam Morimoto lived in Bremerton, Washington, across Puget Sound from Seattle. In 1933, where he established a seafood factory called the Oyster Grow and Shipping Company. His business flourished until after Pearl Harbor, when he was arrested and forced to relocate to an internment camp in California, most likely Tule Lake. When asked about his experience, nearly twenty years later, he said, “I learned how to tolerate loneliness while I was in the camps. Experience is always valuable.” After the war was over, he made his way to Spokane where he contacted Frank Warren, who was looking for a Japanese couple to work for him as custodians

for the college. Warren hired Morimoto, who continued to work for Whitworth until at least 1964. In Morimoto's words, "Dr. Warren was a great man." Morimoto's story is just one more example of the tragedy that affected so many Japanese Americans on the West Coast--a successful businessman, three years in an internment camp, and at least twenty years as a custodian.¹¹

The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II is one of the darker chapters in American history. The rights of American citizens were unlawfully abrogated. It was not until 1988 that surviving internees received \$20,000 each in the form of reparations, along with an apology from the United States government. Whitworth College was not alone in its efforts during the war to make an education available to Japanese Americans, but under Frank Warren, the college certainly was among the leaders in the Pacific Northwest in attempting to mitigate the hate and racism against persons of Japanese descent.

This event remains one of the most significant in Whitworth's history. It provides an example of when, in the face of criticism, the college stepped forward, relying on its Christian identity, to try to do the right thing. In later years, this example would serve as an occasional prompt for what Whitworth could be at its best when confronting injustice. Once the war ended, Whitworth, much like colleges and universities all across the country, would begin another chapter in its history of race, a chapter shaped by the burgeoning civil rights movement.

¹ Dale E. Soden, "World War II Comes to Whitworth College," in *Denominational Higher Education During World War II* ed. By John J. Laukaitis (Switzerland: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2028), 259-284.

² Frank Warren Papers, “Tragedy in the Pacific,” May 3, 1942, Box 1 Folder 16, Whitworth University Archives.

³ Allan Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese American Students and World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Gary Ikihiro, *Storied Lives: Japanese American Students and World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

⁴ *Spokesman Review*, March 5, 1942.

⁵ Japanese American Alumni Papers, Loren Gothberg interviewed by Rose Sliger, November 20, 2002, Box 3 Folder 7, Whitworth University Archives.

⁶ *Whitworthian*, June 8, 1945.

⁷ *Whitworthian*, February 16, 1945.

⁸ Interview, Rose Sliger Krause of Ellen Kubokawa Box 5, Folder 14.

⁹ Mario Vega, “An All American Boy” The Story of Tom Haji and Rural Nisei in World War II last accessed December 22, 2022.

<https://rex.libraries.wsu.edu/esploro/outputs/conferencePoster/An-All-American-Boy-The-Story-of/99900502750901842#file-0>; Dale Soden, *An Enduring Venture of Mind & Heart: An Illustrated History of Whitworth University* (Spokane: Whitworth University, 2010) 79-80.

¹⁰ *Whitworthian*, May 11, 1945. (Haji death)

¹¹ *Whitworthian*, December 11, 1964, p. 5.