Unspoken Memories:
Oral Histories of Hawai‘i Internees at Jerome, Arkansas

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

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Far right, Pat Nomura (COH photo)
Far left, Theodore Ozawa (COH photo)
Left, Ronald Takahata (COH photo)
Below left, Richard Tomiyasu (COH photo)
Below center, Janet Uehara (COH photo)
Below right, Emiko Ueno (COH photo)
INTRODUCTION

This project, *Unspoken Memories: Oral Histories of Hawai‘i Internees at Jerome, Arkansas*, focuses on the wartime experiences of Japanese American families who left their homes in Hawai‘i to be with their fathers who had been incarcerated at various island and Mainland sites.

The project was inspired by the words of a teenager:

“I was born sixteen years ago in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. I am the eldest of a family of five children. This is the first time in my life that I have been away from the islands. . . . Before I came here I was attending Roosevelt High School. I had a pet dog whose name was Duke. . . . Before we came here I had to give him up because we weren’t allowed to bring any pets here. Due to the war, we were evacuated here and I hope that we will be able to return to the islands when war is over.”

The short essay, a classroom assignment, was penned by Betty Kagawa in January 1943, shortly after she, her siblings, and mother arrived at Jerome War Relocation Center to be with her father, Lawrence Takeo Kagawa, who had been removed from the family household and incarcerated since the early months of the war.

In 1944, in her valedictory address, Betty Kagawa proudly affirmed her love of country, her loyalty, and her dedication to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. From the podium at Jerome’s Denson High, she also took note of the graduates’ circumstances, but expressed faith in their capacity to implement change:

“While we dearly love this country, we realize that it does have many faults; that there are many existing conditions that must be improved; one of these deplorable conditions being racial prejudice. One of the chief advantages of a true democratic state is that each one of us as its citizens can play a part in bringing about changes for the better.”

The essay and valedictory address were saved by Denson High School teacher Virginia Tidball and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries.

In 2010, Betty Kagawa’s daughter was informed by the UH Center for Oral History (COH) about her mother’s wartime essay and valedictory address. Until then, she knew little about her mother’s wartime experiences. She had not heard about: the loss of a beloved pet, her mother’s yearning for her island home, her mother’s stellar achievement at Denson High, or her mother’s thoughts on internment. But, as she and her mother pored over the writings, unspoken memories of that time were voiced.

The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, *Honolulu Advertiser*, and *Hawai‘i Herald* have published a few articles on Hawai‘i internees at Jerome and there is information on internees in Patsy Saiki’s *Gambare*, Tomi Knaefler’s *A House Divided*, and a commemorative work published by the Jerome Club; but historical data remains largely anecdotal.

Books on the Hawai‘i internment experience have focused on the wartime experiences of prominent Hawai‘i’s *issei*, *nisei*, and *kibei* who were generally older and established in business, government, education, religion, and cultural practices. These persons were taken from their homes in the islands, held locally and/or confined in Mainland camps. As a result of this focus, the public is aware of confinement sites and the incarceration of Hawai‘i Japanese primarily through the experiences of these persons.

Unknown or unfamiliar to most of the public are the experiences of families, like Betty Kagawa’s, who left homes in Hawai‘i to be reunited with their fathers. Unknown to most are: their struggles in fatherless island households, the coercive forces behind the decision to enter camp, the adjustments to camp life, and the various challenges families faced after Jerome—some were transferred to other camps (e.g., Gila River, Heart Mountain, Tule Lake), some were released to the Midwest and East, some were even moved to Japan—before their return and oftentimes difficult resettlement in the islands.
Unspoken Memories: Oral Histories of Hawai’i Internees at Jerome, Arkansas allows students, researchers, and the general public to learn that the history of the wartime incarceration of Hawai’i Japanese is not limited to the story of older, more established Hawai’i Japanese; included in the history of incarceration are also the stories of families confined at Jerome.

Project Interviewees

Although Hawai’i did not experience mass internment, incarcerated were between 1,200 and 1,400 prominent businessmen, educators, ministers, cultural practitioners, and others of influence in the local Japanese community.

In late 1942/early 1943, families of internees were given the choice of remaining in the islands or going to Mainland confinement sites to be with their fathers. About 1,000 family members chose to be moved. Several made the move to Jerome War Relocation Center in Arkansas, one of only two camps that initially accepted these families.

About 250 – mostly children, under the age of nineteen—were held at Jerome War Relocation Center. In 1985, about 125 of the 250 internees attended a reunion in Honolulu. Today, almost thirty years since that reunion, the number of surviving internees is considerably smaller.

From among the surviving internees, fifteen, ranging in age from seventy-two to eighty-eight, agreed to be interviewed.

Briefly described here are their families’ wartime and early postwar experiences:

Grace Sugita Hawley: In the early months of 1942, her father, Saburo Sugita, a successful businessman, was removed from his home and held at Sand Island Detention Center on O’ahu. In late 1942, her mother, Shizuno Sugita, was informed that if she and the children agreed to be moved to the U.S. Mainland, the family could be together. From 1943 through much of 1945, Saburo Sugita and family were held at Jerome and Heart Mountain War Relocation Centers. Returned to the islands in 1946, the Sugitas were unable to revive their prewar business. Grace, schooled in Hawai’i and the Mainland, graduated from high school on O’ahu.

Lillian Yamasaki Hisanaga: Her father, Kenichi Yamasaki, was a well-known storekeeper and supporter of the Buddhist temple and Japanese-language school in Wai’anae, O’ahu. With the outbreak of war, he was removed from his home and held at Sand Island Detention Center. From there, he was told he was being moved to the U.S. Mainland. He instructed his wife: “Go close the store. Then we all go. Every one of us go. If not, I don’t want to go.” By early 1943, the Yamasakis were sent to Jerome War Relocation Center; later to Amache War Relocation Center. Returning to the islands at war’s end, former storeowner Kenichi Yamasaki was employed by others. Lillian, a seventh-grader at Wai’anae in 1943 who continued studies at Jerome and Amache, graduated high school in Honolulu in 1947.

Shirley Ozuiwatani: Her father, Yoshihiko Ozu, a Hawai’i-born nisei, was educated in Japan. He taught at the Japanese High School in Honolulu and served as principal at Kahului Japanese-language School on Maui. In 1940, he operated the family-owned hat store in Honolulu. On December 7, 1941, he was removed from home and held at the Sand Island Detention Center for a year. He and his family—wife Chiyoko, son Elliot, and infant Shirley—were interned at Jerome and Gila River War Relocation Centers for the duration of the war. Returned to Honolulu in 1945, Yoshihiko Ozu ran the family-run hat store for several years. Later, he resumed teaching. Shirley, although very young at the time of internment, still retains memories of Jerome and Gila River. In this project, she shares excerpts from her father’s writings.

Mabel Kawamura: Her father, Kazuto Ikeda, a Japanese-language school teacher, worked for the Japanese-language newspaper, Hawai’i Hochi. He handled much of the letter-writing needs of Japanese residents in Kona, Hawai’i Island. In April 1942, he was incarcerated at Kilauea Military Camp, then at Sand Island Detention Center. From there, he notified his family that he could be with family if they were
all removed to a U.S. Mainland facility. In December 1942, Kazuto Ikeda and family were transported to Jerome War Relocation Center. In 1944, they were moved to Heart Mountain War Relocation Center. After about two months at Heart Mountain, Mabel was allowed to leave for Minneapolis, Minnesota where she studied to be a beautician. After the war, the Ikedas all returned to the islands. For many years, Mabel owned and operated a beauty salon on O‘ahu.

Doris Taketa Kimura: Her father, Torao Taketa, a Japanese-language educator, was detained at a facility in Wailuku, Maui on December 7, 1941. Family members were allowed to visit him before he was sent to Sand Island Detention Center on O‘ahu. With her father’s incarceration and the closing of Japanese-language schools, the family had no means of support. By late December 1942, her mother, Misu Taketa, informed Doris and her siblings that the government would be moving them to the U.S. Mainland. The Taketas were transported to Jerome War Relocation Center while their father was held at various facilities, including ones in New Mexico and Louisiana. Separated from family for almost three years, Torao Taketa was eventually reunited with family at Tule Lake Segregation Center. At war’s end, the Taketas settled on O‘ahu. With very little knowledge of cooking, Torao Taketa later opened a saimin stand.

Eleanor Aoki Kirito: He father, Tamotsu Aoki, was a kibei, educated in Kumamoto-ken, Japan. Manager of American Savings and Loan on Hawai‘i Island, he was active in the local community. With the outbreak of war, many prominent in the Japanese community were incarcerated. In February 1942, Tamotsu Aoki was detained at Kilauea Military Camp and later moved to Sand Island Detention Center. In December of that year, he, with his family and elderly parents, were relocated to the U.S. Mainland. The Aokis were transported to Jerome War Relocation Center where they remained for about a year and a half. They were then placed in Gila River War Relocation Center for the duration of the war. Returned to the islands, the family was again on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. Tamotsu Aoki resumed work at the savings and loan; Eleanor resumed her studies, graduating from Hilo High School.

Edith Kashiwabara Mikami: Her father, Seisaku Kashiwabara, a fisherman, owned the largest sampan on O‘ahu – the seventy-five-foot Koyo Maru. With the outbreak of war, Seisaku Kashiwabara was removed from his home and held at Sand Island Detention Center. His sampan was confiscated. Released for a time in late 1942, he, his wife Sato, and children were notified of their all being transported to the U.S. Mainland. In a two-week period, household possessions were sold or given away. The Kashiwabaras were held, first at Jerome War Relocation Center; later at the Gila River War Relocation Center. At war’s end, they all returned to the islands. The older children worked full-time jobs while the younger ones, including Edith, took on part-time jobs. After several years, the family managed to buy back their father’s sampan. Edith received her high school and community college degrees in Honolulu.

Carol Kubota Murakawa: Her father, Ryudo Kubota, minister at the Lahaina Jōdo Mission on Maui, also served as principal of the Japanese-language school. With the outbreak of war, he was confined at a facility on Maui; later he was moved to Sand Island Detention Center. By early 1943, the Kubota family, too, was moved. They were incarcerated at Jerome War Relocation Center, while their father was held elsewhere. He was at several facilities, including the Santa Fe Department of Justice Camp and Camp Livingston, a U.S. Army Internment Camp. In 1944, Ryudo Kubota and family were reunited at Tule Lake Segregation Center. Like many at Tule Lake, the Kubotas intended to go to Japan. But, dissuaded from going to Japan, they returned at war’s end to Maui. Ryudo Kubota served the congregation at Lahaina Jōdo Mission until his death in 1955. Carol Kubota graduated from Lahainaluna High School in 1951.

James Nakano: His father, Minoru Nakano, was a general contractor on O‘ahu. Prior to World War II, members of the Nakano family took trips to Japan. In December 1941, Minoru Nakano’s parents, two sons, and two daughters were living in Japan. In February 1942, Minoru Nakano was removed from his home. Initially incarcerated at Sand Island Detention Center, he was later sent to facilities on the U.S. Mainland. By early 1943, the Nakano family in Hawai‘i—his wife and three sons—was incarcerated, too. They were placed in Jerome War Relocation Center. As the center closed in 1944, Minoru Nakano joined the family. Having expressed a desire to go to Japan, the Nakanos were assigned to Tule Lake Segregation Center. At war’s end, a daughter was born to Minoru and Sugano Nakano at Tule Lake. In
the postwar, various family members, including James, were returned to the islands. Minoru Nakano resumed contracting.

Patricia Kirita Nomura: Her father, Kamekichi Kirita, was a storeowner and acupuncturist. He was an advocate for Japanese-language schools and a Japanese consular agent. On December 7, 1941, he was detained, first at a jail in Kapaʻau, later at Kilauea Military Camp, both located on Hawai‘i Island. Family members were allowed to visit prior to his being moved to Sand Island Detention Center. In December 1942, family was again allowed to see him at the Immigration Station at Honolulu, prior to their being incarcerated in the U.S. Mainland. His wife and children were sent to Jerome War Relocation Center; he was sent to various other detention facilities. After one-and-a-half years of separation, the Kiritas were reunited in Jerome. With Jerome War Relocation Center closing in 1944, the family spent the remainder of the war at Gila River War Relocation Center. Returning to the islands in 1945, the Kiritas were without their prewar livelihood and home on Hawai‘i Island. On O‘ahu, Kamekichi Kirita found employment as a janitor and wife Toka operated a saimin stand. After completing her studies in the islands, Patricia went to the Mainland, where she graduated from Hardin-Simmons University.

Theodore Ozawa: His father, Yoshikiyo Ozawa, a Soto Mission minister whose Buddhist name was Gijo, was minister at Zenshuji in Wahiawa, Kaua‘i. He was principal of the Japanese-language school and organized classes in martial arts. With the outbreak of war, he was removed from the minister’s residence on December 7, 1941. Initially held at a facility on Kaua‘i, he was later moved to Sand Island Detention Center and to the U.S. Mainland. The Ozawa family—Hanako and four children, Theodore, Donald, Gordon, and Clara—were placed in Jerome War Relocation Center in early 1943. Separated from their father who was held elsewhere, they were not reunited until all were sent to Tule Lake Segregation Center in summer, 1944. Theodore’s brother, Walter, was born at Tule Lake. Allowed to return to the islands in 1945, the Ozawas returned to Zenshuji where they remained until they were transferred to Taiyoji on O‘ahu in 1951.

Ronald Takahata: His father, Yoshio Takahata, was a storekeeper. Over a number of years, he owned general merchandise stores in Kealakekua, Nāpo‘opo‘o, and Hōnaunau, Kona, Hawai‘i. Yoshio Takahata, a leader in the local Japanese community, served as liaison between residents and the Japanese consulate. By 1941, the family included six children. In early 1942, Yoshio Takahata was removed from his home and incarcerated at Kilauea Military Camp. Later, he was moved to the Sand Island Detention Center and various facilities on the U.S. Mainland. The Takahata family, too, in 1943, was removed from Kona and incarcerated at Jerome War Relocation Center. Just before Jerome was closed in 1944, Yoshio Takahata rejoined the family. The Takahatas were then moved to Heart Mountain War Relocation Center. After a few months at Heart Mountain, Ronald gained release and went to Chicago, where he found employment and married a Jerome internee, Asako Kawamura. At war’s end Yoshio Takahata and family returned to the islands. He operated a store in Hilo for a while until business declined. Returning to the islands with an infant, Ronald and Asako Takahata settled on O‘ahu.

Richard Tomiyasu: Days or possibly weeks following the outbreak of war, his mother, Kikuyo Tomiyasu, was questioned by FBI agents and removed from their home in Honolulu for possession of a shortwave radio. She was held at Fort Armstrong near the U.S. Immigration Station for about a year. In the early months of 1943, the family prepared for a move to the Mainland. Their home was sold and belongings packed. The Tomiyasus, including mother Kikuyo, father Katsutaro, their three sons, and a granddaughter (by Kikuyo’s previous marriage), were transported to Jerome War Relocation Center. The family was held there for one-and-a-half years. Later, the family was moved to Gila River War Relocation Center where they remained for another year and a half. Returned to the islands in December 1945, the Tomiyasus found themselves homeless. They were sheltered at the Fort Street Young Buddhists Association Building for a few months. Employed as a maintenance man, Katsutaro Tomiyasu supported his family. They later lived in a home not too far from their prewar residence.

Janet Tahara Uehara: Her father, Kameo Tahara, a priest and teacher, brought the family from Japan to Lawai, Kaua‘i in 1935. He filled a vacancy at the Shinto shrine where he conducted ceremonies and blessings. On the night of December 7, 1941, he was removed from home and detained at a facility in Kapa‘a, Kaua‘i. Later, he was moved to Sand Island Detention Center. In late December 1942, Janet, her
mother, and her sister-in-law were given notice to pack their belongings for their removal to Honolulu and the U.S. Mainland. Arriving in Jerome War Relocation Center, the women were disappointed to learn that Kameo Tahara was being held elsewhere. He was reunited with his family in 1944 just as Jerome was closing. Since her father had expressed a desire to return to Japan, the Taharas were sent to Tule Lake Segregation Center. But, at war’s end, with a change of heart, the Taharas returned to Hawai‘i. Kameo Tahara later assumed the priest’s post at Kato Jinja in Honolulu.

Emiko Matsuo Ueno: Her father, Umesuke Matsuo, was a Japanese-language school principal and teacher on Hawai‘i Island. With the outbreak of war, he was removed from his home, initially detained at Kilauea Military Camp, and later sent to Sand Island Detention Center and various facilities on the U.S. Mainland. The Matsuos—mother Masae and six children—relied on welfare and income earned by Emiko. By late December 1942, the family, too, was being sent to the Mainland. The Matsuos were held at Jerome War Relocation Center. In 1944, Umesuke Matsuo was allowed to rejoin his family. From Jerome, because of Umesuke Matsuo’s expressed desire to return to Japan, they were sent to Tule Lake Segregation Center. From Tule Lake, with no intention of following her father’s plan, Emiko joined the Nurse Cadet Corps in Illinois. At war’s end, the family opted not to go to Japan. Instead they returned to O‘ahu where father and mother eventually worked at hotels. Emiko worked for many years as a nurse in Honolulu.

Project Background and Methodology

The Center for Oral History (COH) applied for and received in 2010, a Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior.

Knowing that the number of nisei who can still recall and speak about their World War II incarceration decreases with each passing year and knowing that Hawai‘i-born nisei held at Jerome War Relocation Center constitute a small minority of those incarcerated, an urgent need to conduct interviews was felt.

The Center for Oral History via documentary research and community resources identified several individuals who were removed from the islands to be with their fathers at Jerome. Identified also was one individual whose family was incarcerated at Jerome so that they could be with their mother who had been removed from their family home and confined since 1942.

COH staff was able to phone and talk with more than thirty individuals, but several declined to participate. Poor health; lack of confidence in their memories; privacy issues; a feeling that it was not their story, but their parents’ stories that should have been recorded years earlier; a feeling that they as youthful internees had little to contribute to the project; and a desire not to recall their families’ wartime experiences; were among the reasons given to COH for non-participation. COH staff listened respectfully and took to heart people’s concerns; although no recordings resulted from these contacts, the phone conversations were still invaluable to the project staff.

Of the more than thirty individuals contacted, eighteen agreed to meet with COH to learn more about the project and to participate in unrecorded preliminary interviews. Most were motivated to do so by their desire to inform present and future generations about their experiences.

Fifteen out of the eighteen agreed to be recorded; two, while willing to share information informally, declined to be recorded, and one could not be recorded due to scheduling conflicts.

Final selection was based on the interviewees’ depth and breadth of knowledge; their ability to articulate their own and their families’ prewar, wartime, and postwar experiences, particularly those associated with incarceration; and their willingness and availability to participate as interviewees.

COH Director Warren Nishimoto and Research Coordinator Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto jointly conducted the interviews. All fifteen interviews were conducted at various sites—mostly the interviewees’ homes, the COH office, or other agreed-upon locations—on O‘ahu from 2011 through 2013. The majority of interviews involved two or more sessions. The project’s twenty-seven sessions resulted in thirty-nine hours of taping.
Because interviewees were asked to comment on experiences and incidents oftentimes specific to their own lives, no set questionnaire was used. Instead, a life history approach was followed, creating biographical case studies centered mainly on the backgrounds of the interviewees and the events that shaped their lives. Topics discussed include: family history, childhood and family life in prewar Hawai‘i, father’s incarceration in Hawai‘i and U.S. Mainland, family’s incarceration at Jerome and other relocation centers, release from confinement, and postwar life. Observations and reflections on these topics were also sought.

COH-trained student transcribers transcribed the interviews almost verbatim. The transcripts, audio-reviewed by COH Research Associate Holly Yamada to correct omissions and other errors, were edited slightly for clarity and historical accuracy.

The transcripts were then sent to interviewees for their review and approval. Interviewees were asked to verify names and dates and to clarify statements where necessary. The interviewees’ changes were incorporated in the final version—the version that includes all statements the interviewees wish to leave for the public record.

After the transcripts were reviewed and approved, interviewees read and signed a document allowing the Center for Oral History-University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and the general public, scholarly and educational use of the transcripts.

While not entirely accurate, the aim of an oral history interview is the creation of a reliable and valid primary source document. To achieve this end, the researcher/interviewers selected interviewees carefully, established rapport, listened carefully with empathy, asked thoughtful questions, corroborated interviewee statements when possible, encouraged interviewees to review their statements with care, and obtained permission from the interviewees to use their real names, rather than pseudonyms.

**Project/Transcript Usage**

This project includes: photos of the interviewees, a glossary of all italicized non-English and Hawai‘i Creole English (HCE) words, and a name/place index. A biographical summary precedes each interview.

There is a series of numbers at the beginning of each transcript. This series includes, in order, a project number, cassette number, session number, and year the interview was conducted. For example, 57-4-1-12 identifies COH project number 57, cassette number 4, recorded interview session 1, and the year, 2012.

Brackets [ ] in the transcripts indicate additions/changes made by COH staff. Parentheses ( ) indicate additions/changes made by the interviewee. A three-dot ellipsis indicates an interruption; a four-dot ellipsis indicates a trail-off by a speaker. Three dashes indicate a false start.

The transcripts are the primary documents presently available for research purposes.

The audio recordings are in storage and not available for use, unless written permission is obtained from the Center for Oral History.

**Center for Oral History**

The Center for Oral History (COH) is a unit of the Social Science Research Institute, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

The only state-supported center of its kind in the islands, COH researches, conducts, transcribes, edits, and disseminates oral history interviews focused on Hawai‘i’s past. Since its inception in 1976, COH has interviewed more than 800 individuals and deposited in archives, a collection of more than 36,000 transcript pages.
In addition to providing researchers with first-person, primary-source documents, the Center for Oral History produces educational materials (journal and newspaper articles, books, videos, dramatizations, et cetera) based on the interviews.

The Center also presents lectures and facilitates discussions on local history, conducts classes and workshops on oral history methodology, and serves as a clearinghouse for oral history research relating to Hawai‘i.

For more information, visit the Center for Oral History website at http://www.oralhistory.hawaii.edu.