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Film Chronicles War Internee Experience



By John Sammon—A new film titled “Prisoners and Patriots” its producer said would preserve the testimony of Japanese American survivors of internment during World War II, and would also act as a warning to future generations that such injustices can happen again.

“You would hope the lessons of history can be learned and injustice prevented,” said Neil Simon. “We saw certain similarities with the way Japanese Americans were treated during World War II and Muslims in this country after 9-11. We can all learn a lesson about the dangers of hysteria.”

The U.S. government in 1942 moved approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans from their homes to internment camps scattered throughout western states in the belief they were disloyal and posed a threat. Many of the displaced persons never regained their homes and property. The government officially admitted wrongdoing in the 1980s and apologized for engaging in war hysteria, racism and a lack of leadership.

“You can’t put a value on a life,” Simon said. “These people were in their prime, running businesses and achieving, when their lives were disrupted and changed forever because of the internment.”

The camps housed inmates who had been born in Japan and immigrated to the United States, called Issei, and Nisei, those born in America but with at least one Japanese-born or non-immigrant parent.

Simon, a television journalist and reporter for news stations in New Mexico, has produced three films, one a documentary on Bill Richardson, former governor of New Mexico from 2003 to 2011. He said he decided to do a film about Japanese American internment after visiting a monument at one of the former camps near Santa Fe.

“I grew up in Portland, went to university and studied political science, journalism, history and TV reporting,” he recalled. “I worked for Station KOB in New Mexico. I was looking to produce a new film, and I found that there were hardly any books or films on Santa Fe Internment Camp, no account of how they spent their time in the camp during the war. If there had been, I would have said good, and let it go at that.”

Simon began the project in 2005. He discovered that a lot of camp survivors had already died, taking their memories with them.

“I began recording interviews for the film separate from my news reporting job,” he said. “I would work on it whenever I could, sometimes by using my own vacation time.”

Simon said he found the names of living survivors to interview by studying U.S. Government records, questioning officials at the Santa Fe Internment Camp site, and from the survivors themselves.

“The survivors would give me names of other survivors,” he explained.

Those interviewed displayed a range of emotions as they recounted their memories for him before a camera.

“I think over time during the questioning they saw me as someone they could trust,” Simon said. “Their stories were not always sad. Their lives were filled with experiences that can’t be easily categorized.”

The government ran four camps for those considered “high risk” prisoners, most of them Japanese born. One was at Santa Fe. Santa Fe became a prison for so-called “No No Boys,” men from the Tule Lake Segregation Center in California and other camps who refused to serve in the U.S. military armed forces or to declare allegiance to the United States. They were stripped of their U.S. citizenship and sent to Santa Fe.

In March of 1945, the first 425 internees arrived from California. By war’s end, 4,555 inmates were in the Santa Fe camp. The average age of the men in the camp was 53.

“The biggest difference among the camps was that at Santa Fe all the inmates were men,” Simon said. “There was no contact there with women. They included men who had been leaders in their

communities, the kind of men people might follow, like business and church leaders, anybody the government thought might not be loyal.”

Akira Otani of Hawaii, a camp survivor, recalled when officials came for his father.

“They placed a handgun in his face and said, ‘we’re taking you in.’”
Survivor Noboru Taguma remembered.

“The way they treated us, we were bad boys,” he said. “We got mad.”

Survivor Bill Nishimura said he also protested the treatment.

“I wanted to be a U.S. citizen,” he said. “And I wanted to be treated right. I said I have no intention to fight for the U.S. at this time, not until you give me back my civil rights.”

Even those serving in the U.S. military came under suspicion, as Otani learned when he enlisted as an American soldier.

“Here I was, serving in the army with a couple stripes on my uniform sleeve, and they still required an armed guard at the camp to stand between my dad and myself when I visited,” he said.

Only one tense incident took place in March of 1945 at Santa Fe when a group of inmates who had earlier arrived from Tule Lake and were labeled Pro-Japanese by authorities, reportedly displayed sweatshirts with a Rising Sun logo. Ordered to remove the sweatshirts, some of the “Tuleans” were transferred to Fort Stanton near the town of Capitan, New Mexico. A crowd gathered to protest, rocks were thrown and tear gas was used to disperse onlookers. According to the National Park Service, 350 internees were put in the Santa Fe Camp stockade.

There were no further incidents.

On the whole, relations between inmates and camp guards were fairly relaxed. Some guards appeared to be stern, while others slept or lounged, bored with guard duty. If the inmates were playing a baseball game, a staple entertainment at many of the camps, and the ball went through the barbed wire, a guard would retrieve it and toss it back.

“The prisoners and the guards had sort of a friendly relationship,” remembered Jerry West, the son of a camp guard.

Simon agreed. “Most of the time the guards would stay out of the way,” he said. “They knew nobody was going to escape, and that they had an easy job.”

The film exhibits paintings done by inmates and guards portraying the day-to-day activities of life in the camp. In addition to art or sports, the prisoners often spent their time writing letters to relatives or to officials in an attempt to rejoin their family, or to regain their citizenship.

“I wrote letters home to my mom, but they were censored,” survivor Frank Sumida recalled. Government officials began to limit the approximate 2,000 letters going out from the camp each day, but were more lenient to prisoners who had a relative serving in the armed forces.

Sumida recounted that life at the camp wasn’t all bad.

“They had beer and candies at the Santa Fe Canteen,” he said. “The other centers didn’t have those. We were fed pretty good in Santa Fe.”

The prisoners also established and printed their own newspaper, and held regular religious services. In addition, the inmates formed their own self-governing body.

“That was ironic,” Simon said. “Here they were suspected of disloyalty, and they formed their own democratic system of government inside the camp.”

Norman Hirose, another camp survivor, said the barracks the prisoners lived in was the standard wooden one just like on any army base.

Most of those Simon interviewed were over the age of 80. One of them, Ruth Hashimoto, was the daughter of a former minister of the Konko Church in San Jose’s Japantown.

“The church was boarded up and vandalized during the war,” Simon said. “Ruth passed away last year.”

Another story in the film recounted the courage of a doctor named Tanaka.

“He had already faced discrimination trying to get his doctor’s degree,” Simon said. “Now he was told to be doctor for his brethren in the detention camp. That’s what he did. He served the inmates.”

Inmates at Santa Fe created an orchard at the camp, and a golf course.

“That’s where I learned to play golf,” one survivor recalled.

In April of 1946 the Santa Fe Camp closed. Some of the prisoners returned to California and the San Jose area to try and repair their shattered lives.

The film is currently being edited and will run 60 or 90 minutes upon completion. Simon said he received help from a number of skilled photographers and artists, some of whom donated their time to the project. A musician based in San Francisco, Scott Nagatani, supplied musical score for the film, and James Hattori, also a San Francisco resident, narrated it.

The premier takes place on April 22 at the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center in Portland, Oregon. Simon said he will be seeking wide distribution for the film including showings on Public Broadcast (PBS) and other television networks, also schools and museums around the country.

He said never in one interview did any of the surviving inmates exhibit a bitter or revengeful attitude for what was done to them.

“None of them had a chip on the shoulder,” Simon said. “They never held a grudge. They were all true patriots, and were thankful after the war ended that they were allowed to go home.”

The story shows that people courageously tried to do their best under trying circumstances. “I think the film will be a testimony to the human spirit,” he added.

A preview clip of Prisoners and Patriots can be seen on Youtube and at www.vimeo.com.

Two places to support the film:

1. To view a five-minute version of the forthcoming film, go online to www.vimeo.com/santafe or on the NikkeiWest Web site)
2. To order advance copies of the DVD or to provide photos, artifacts or your own story about the Santa Fe Internment Camp experience, contact Neil Simon at neilhsimon@gmail.com

URL: <http://www.nikkeiwest.com/index.php/the-news/past-articles/172-film-chronicles-war-internee-experience>