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PIGEON-HOLE MUSINGS

By Jimmie Omura

Dear Friend:

It is not often that I can find the opportunity of writing to you in these confused days and it is only by the sacrifice of valuable time that I take the occasion to acquaint you with the events that have touched my life and left their indelible imprint.

You may justly wonder why after these months of silence I have broken the spell. Perhaps I hear the skeleton of 1942 rattling in the closet and as this great eventful year fades into history, be impelled to reminisce on the great and trivial events that have occurred and made of our lives a living shamble.

How many of us thought before that bloody Sunday of Dec. 7, 1941, that the terribleness of war would enter our very homes and touch us with its macabre wand? Surely, few of us did. How chagrined we were and indignant, yes, at news of the treacherous attack on our military outpost at Pearl Harbor?

The die had been cast. The wave of public indignation, whipped up by pressure groups, drew us into its web and engulfed us. And we felt ourselves helpless, though by the inviolable doctrines of our own beloved federal constitution we were citizens and entitled to the same protection and consideration bestowed upon fellow citizens of other derivations.

I can remember vividly that day in late March that we were forced to flee from San Francisco. It was 11 a. m. on the 29th, only thirteen hours away from the military deadline for voluntary evacuation. The day and night before we had spent in feverish packing for the journey ahead of us. The sun was out brightly and the Sabbath quiet prevailed. Except for the anxiety which hastened us and the motive behind our departure, one would not have thought that war had already touched our lives.

To me—as I faced the long journey to my new home in Denver—the fruitlessness of our efforts in the critical days of the Great Evacuation caused a foreboding sadness. The memory of how I had appeared in working attire before the august body of the Tolan Congressional Investigating Committee to testify crossed my thoughts. I was the only person from the Japanese communities to stand firm and steadfast against the arbitrary removal inland of the 75,000 Nisei. I felt alone

then as I did during all those critical days while I was waging the battle for the preservation of constitutional liberties of the American-born.

If ever you have an opportunity to read the Tolan Committee's San Francisco hearings, you will find my testimony beginning on page 11229. But I would like to direct your attention to this one particular sentence: "I am strongly opposed to the mass evacuation of American-born Japanese." Those incisive words have been incorporated in the Tolan Report, and to this very day I firmly believe that the whole idea of the evacuation was entirely wrong . . . that a travesty on justice has been committed.

Further along in the Tolan Report, you will find this passage: "Are we to be condemned merely on the basis of our racial origin? Is citizenship such a light and transient thing that that which is our inalienable right in normal times can be torn from us in times of war? We in America are intensely proud of our individual rights and willing, I am sure, to defend those rights with our very lives. I venture to say that the great majority of Nisei Americans, too, will do the same against any aggressor nation—though that nation be Japan. Citizenship to us is no small heritage; it is a very precious and jealous right."

There were many people among my own society who felt that I was rash to employ such strong language. They felt that I was being too critical of the army. That night, preceding the establishment of military areas on the west coast, the Writers Mobilization of America were assembled in the studio of Isamu Noguchi and there again I was challenged on my strong use of words. Too critical of the army? There is no organization or individual who could not stand some criticism.

But my exhortations fell on empty ears. The national office of the J. A. C. L. held a mock community meeting. The Bay Region Council for Unity, a vain idea that I sponsored, became a mere tool of the J. A. C. L. The Coordinating Committee of the San Francisco Japanese Y. M. C. A. was hardly more effective. I watched various organizations that had originally been critical of the national J. A. C. L. policy jumping on the bandwagon. And I

felt defeated.

You have perhaps wondered why I have been so strongly opposed to the J. A. C. L. I am convinced that the national officers let the Nisei down. They were too eager to "yes" the army. They did not fight for the rights of the U. S.-born. Instead of looking at the evacuation from a broader standpoint, these J. A. C. L. leaders attempted to profit on the distress of U. S. Japanese as individuals and as an organization. It was first J. A. C. L. and second, the cause. If you doubt me, study the innumerable facets of the evacuation. I have a whole volume of it for your use.

I thought of these things as I journeyed down the central valley route to Bakersfield, on over the Tehachapi pass, through the desert waste of the Mojave, and across the barren plains of northern Arizona and New Mexico. Bitter, indeed, were my thoughts.

But greater disappointments were yet to come. We were not welcomed when we arrived in Denver. Colorado Japanese did not want us. They were concerned with the safety of their own little hides and resented our coming.

Those who preceded me—for I was among the last arrivals—told tales of evacuees standing in long lines in the cold of March weather, uncertain as to what to do and where to go. Small children tugged

at mothers' coats, crying their hunger. The Colorado Japanese, I am told, remained indifferent in the face of this pitiful sight. I have heard this story recounted many times not alone by my own racial people but by the Anglo-Americans I have since come to know. Certainly, so many different people would have no object in lying.

Today the task which we assumed—the continued representation for the rights of the U. S. Japanese and their relocation in gainful and fruitful employment is a herculean problem, and though I am not in any affluent financial condition, I am committed to this work. Perhaps the Evacuee Placement Bureau will drain me of every red cent I possess, but until that last cent is spent this work will be carried on. And even afterward.

I have perhaps bored you with this long letter, but I thought that you should know something of the problem which we Americans, though racially Japanese, are undergoing and how some of us feel today. We only pray and hope that some day—and may that day be soon—you people of Anglo-American strain will believe in us and will accord us the rightful consideration which is our due.

Very sincerely yours,

J—