

What Happened To The Property Of Sacramento's Japanese American Community Interned During World War II?

Emily Zentner, Tuesday, June 4, 2019 | Sacramento, CA



Lester Ouchida sits in his Sacramento home, near where he grew up in Florin. His family was one of the fortunate few who were able to keep their homes after they were incarcerated during World War II. Andrew Nixon / Capital Public Radio

Marielle Tsukamoto was 5 years old when her family was removed from their farm on the southeast edge of Sacramento in Florin and taken to an incarceration center in 1942.

She got up at 5 a.m. and walked out into the backyard to see her grandmother crying while looking at her garden, worrying that she would never come home and see it again.

“I only got to take clothes and I know I cried because I wanted some toys, and mostly, I wanted my dog,” Tsukamoto said.

Tsukamoto and her family were among the more than 100,000 Japanese Americans forced from their homes by Executive Order 9066. The order, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, called for the forced removal of all people of Japanese heritage to incarceration centers, where they were held until the end of the war.

Sacramento resident Andy Hesse experienced this time from another perspective. As a young, white child in Sacramento, he saw neighbors and one of his father’s colleagues forced to relocate and wondered what happened to them. To this day, he has wanted to know what became of the homes, farms and businesses that were left behind by those imprisoned by the U.S. government.

Nearly 80 years later, he posed this question to CapRadio’s Great Question series: What happened to the property of Japanese Americans in Sacramento who were interned during the war?

Losing "Virtually Everything"

The California Museum’s Uprooted! exhibit gives visitors a window into the impact of the Japanese American internment on the state. As visitors walk through the exhibit, they are surrounded by trunks, baseball mitts, kimonos and other items that belonged to imprisoned Japanese Americans.

While the situation varied from person to person, many lost “virtually everything” when they were forced to leave their homes in 1942, California Museum Executive Director Amanda Meeker said.



California Museum Executive Director Amanda Meeker reads through an exclusion order against Japanese Americans at the museum’s Uprooted! exhibit with reporter Emily Zentner and question asker Andy Hesse.
Andrew Nixon / Capital Public Radio

“People had to sell things off,” she said. “They had no place to put them. They had nobody to take care of places. They would have to sell them off and, if you can imagine 120,000 people leaving, there obviously were bargain basement prices.”

Nationwide, the National Archives has records from the War Relocation Authority for 109,384 Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their communities and taken to incarceration centers. Those imprisoned ended up losing between \$2 billion and \$5 billion worth of property in 2017 dollars during the war, according to the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.

Of those imprisoned, at least 7,723 were relocated from the Sacramento region, including the Davis, Roseville and Auburn areas.

"The exception, not the rule"

While the majority of Sacramento's Japanese American community lost their homes and businesses during their imprisonment, a lucky few found ways to hang on.

Lester Ouchida's family was one of the fortunate ones. When they were forced to leave their Florin home when Ouchida was 5, they were able to keep their home with the help of a white neighbor, Mary McComber.

Prior to World War II, the Florin area where Ouchida grew up had a dense community of Japanese American farmers who were displaced by the forced relocation. Driving through that area now, he remembers a time when the stretches of land around the small downtown were dominated by fields of strawberries and Tokay grapes worked by Japanese American families.



This Florin lot used to hold the house that Lester Ouchida grew up in.
His family was able to keep their home after they were incarcerated during World War II thanks to the help of a white neighbor,
Mary McComber
Andrew Nixon / Capital Public Radio

McComber rented their home to a minister and sent the money back to his father in the incarceration center while the family was interned, Ouchida said. He knows that his family was lucky to have a neighbor like McComber who would help them.

“That was fortunate, and some of us had the same kind of thing, but others didn't have that closeness to a white family so they struggled or they might have even lost their homes,” Ouchida said.

While they were able to keep their home thanks to McComber, the family did not come out of the war financially unscathed.

Ouchida's father had a successful fruit distribution business that he had to leave when his family was imprisoned. While he was able to return to the business after the war, Ouchida said that it was never as successful as it once was.

"I still remember he had an international panel and an army truck, so two trucks he started the business with," Ouchida said. "It grew to be maybe 10 trucks, but it was nothing like he had had before. He was able to make a living, but it was not as good as his pre-war years."

Tsukamoto's parents, Mary and Al Tsukamoto, also had to deal with the question of how to keep their home. But they also faced a separate issue: Who would care for and pay taxes on their grape and strawberry farm while they were imprisoned?

When the relocation order came, Tsukamoto's father worried about his elderly cousin's and neighbor's farms before his own, Tsukamoto said.



Marielle Tsukamoto stands next to the Florin lot where her family's farm used to be.
Andrew Nixon / Capital Public Radio

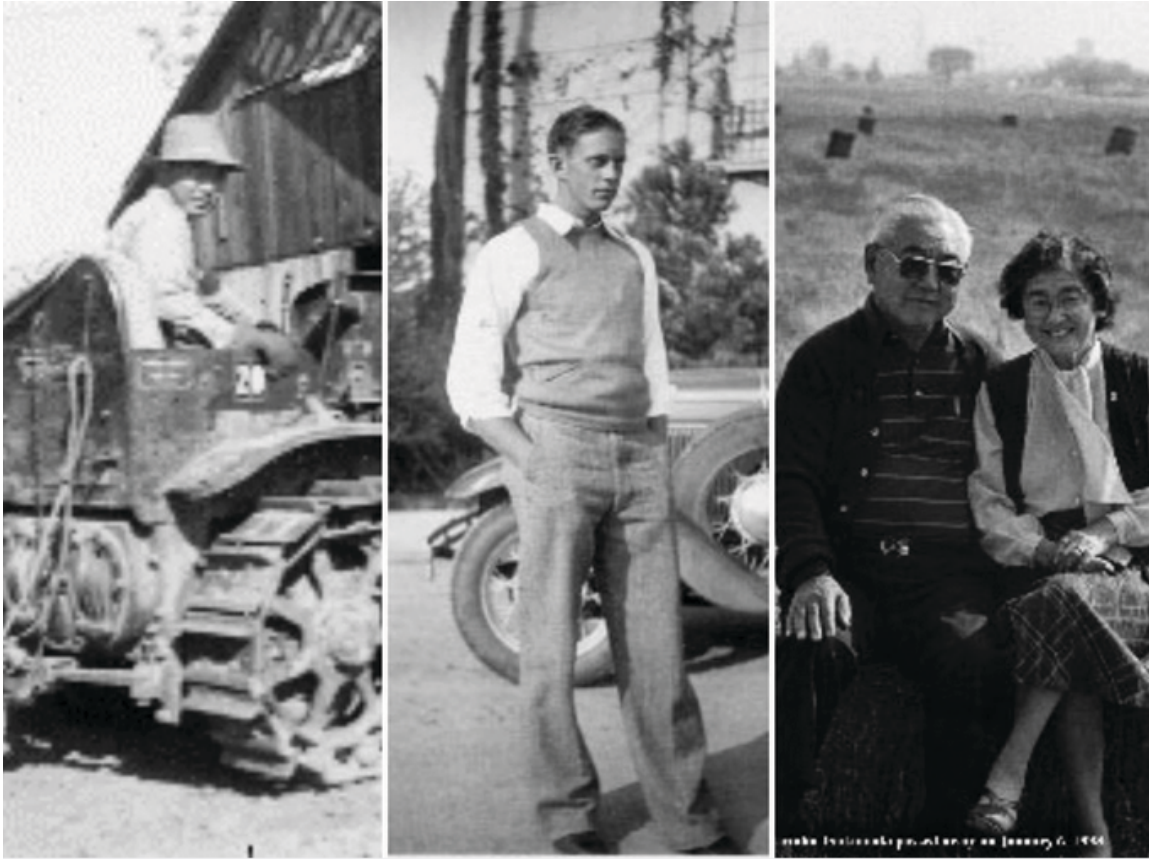
War time was a profitable time to be working a farm, Tsukamoto said, so her father reached out to state fruit inspector Bob Fletcher with a business proposition. If Fletcher would work Tsukamoto's cousin and neighbor's farms while they were away, and Tsukamoto's if he had time, he could keep the profits so long as he paid the mortgage and taxes on the properties.

Fletcher took care of all three farms, more than 100 acres worth of land, until they returned to Florin in 1945.

"I know he had a hard time," Tsukamoto said. "He was so humble and such a good person. He never wanted credit for doing something special. He said it wasn't something special. His exact words were, 'It's the right thing to do.'"

Even though Tsukamoto’s family knew that their property would be cared for and waiting for them when they returned, leaving their home behind to head off into uncertainty was heartbreaking. For her grandmother, it meant having to leave behind her garden without ever knowing if she would see it again.

“I don’t think anyone believed that we were gonna get killed,” Tsukamoto said. “But my grandmother was in her 60s, my grandfather was 75. We had no idea where we were going, how long we would be gone, what would happen to us. So she didn’t believe she would ever come back.”



Marielle Tsukamoto's father, Al Tsukamoto, on a tractor on his farm; Bob Fletcher in 1935;
Al and Mary Tsukamoto on their farm after the war.
Courtesy of Marielle Tsukamoto

Sacramento State University archivist Julie Thomas takes care of the university’s collection of archival information about Japanese American incarceration in Sacramento during World War II.

Families like the Ouchidas and the Tsukamotos were far more fortunate than most families who were interned, she said.

In many cases, Thomas said, families who had no one to look after their land and homes lost them due to unpaid taxes and mortgages. “They were the exception, not the rule,” Thomas said. “If you weren’t a community leader, if you didn’t speak English... I think that the rule was that the best case scenario was that the land was fallow [when families returned].”

The same things that make Ouchida and Tsukamoto’s stories exceptional are the things that make them easier to tell. The Ouchidas and the Tsukamotos were prominent families in Florin’s Japanese American community before their imprisonment, and they continue to be active as community leaders in Sacramento, Thomas said.

The stories of those who lost everything are harder to find, even though historians like Thomas and Meeker know that they existed.

But even for people like Ouchida and Tsukamoto who were able to keep their homes, life in Sacramento after the war was far from easy.

Discrimination At Home

About a year after Japanese Americans were forced into incarceration centers, the Sacramento City Council passed a resolution opposing the return of Japanese Americans to Sacramento.

“Whereas, the atrocious conduct of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor and the murder of the Aviators recently acknowledged and even flaunted in the faces of law abiding Nations, has recently brought sharply to the attention of the American people the treachery, faithlessness, and untrustworthiness of the Pagan Japanese...” it read.

That resolution was not repealed until 2014.

When the Tsukamotos were released from the incarceration center, they were warned by those who had already come home that there had been threats made against returning Japanese Americans. Under fear of attack as his family returned to their home, Tsukamoto’s father hatched a plan.

“He delayed getting back until it was dark, and as he turned into our driveway, he turned the lights off on the car so nobody would see that we had come home,” Tsukamoto said.

A week or two after the family returned Tsukamoto’s father headed into town to buy a part for their tractor

He was told by the shopkeeper that they didn’t carry that part. When Tsukamoto’s father returned home and told Fletcher about this, Fletcher was suspicious. He went to the store himself and asked about the part, and was sold it on the spot.

Stand Up And Say, ‘Stop’

For Ouchida and Tsukamoto, it's important for them to share the history they lived through with today’s youth. Both are docents with the California Museum’s Time of Remembrance program, where they tell students about what happened to them as children.

Tsukamoto’s mother, Mary Tsukamoto, founded the program decades ago in the hopes that she could educate the students of the Elk Grove Unified School District about what happened to prevent something similar happening again. Today, Tsukamoto continues to volunteer her time with the program for the same reason.

“History has a tendency to repeat itself,” Tsukamoto said. “[My mother] wanted to make sure that when there was a group that was targeted like we were, and used as scapegoats for some reason, that people would have the sense to stand up and say, ‘Stop.’”



Marielle Tsukamoto looks at a map that her mother made as a teaching tool for her Time of Remembrance program.
Andrew Nixon / Capital Public Radio