

UNCOVERING THE HOLES OF OUR PAST

By Riki Eijima,
Contributor

In 2008, the University of Denver held the first field study at Amache. Scholarly work has been conducted there every two years. Besides archaeology students, a number of former Amache residents and their descendants have participated in the monthlong digs. This summer, another crew of researchers will return to the former camp.

Eijima participated in the 2014 dig in Colorado, as a descendant of the camp. Last year, a program on Amache was held at Sonoma State University, where she served as a panelist. This summer, members of her family will be participating once again at the Amache field study.

Following is her first-hand recollection of her experience there.

My University of Denver Amache Field School experience was a first for several things: an unaccompanied plane ride, college class, archaeological dig and visit to an internment camp. Backed by the generosity of the University of Denver, I became a DU Pioneer in the summer of 2014, eager to take on this task and uncover the holes of my past.

During World War II, my maternal grandfather, Frank Suzuki, was incarcerated at the Granada Relocation Center, along with his family and many other Japanese Americans from Los Angeles, Sebastopol and Central California. Since I was a child, I had heard my grandparents tell me stories of life in the Tanforan and Merced Assembly Centers and Granada and Topaz Relocation Centers. However, until going to Amache, I was unaware that many third-, fourth- and fifth-generation JAs have never learned of their ancestors' internment and discrimination. Because this is a dark part of our country's history, it is imperative that we know about this injustice in order to recognize our wrongs and move forward.

One of my favorite things during field school was the scintillating conversations we had in the evenings. One discussion particularly spurred my interest. We talked about the term "internment" and its euphemistic use. Words like "relocation center" are not accurate representations of the Japanese/Japanese American experience. Whenever we talk about Nazi Germany and Japanese American internment in high school, I take exception when classmates argue that the Jews experienced greater hardship than did the JAs. Both confinements were great injustices, and the two cannot be equated. No matter the degree of racism or oppression, both exploits were racist and oppressive.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RIKI EIJIMA



Excavation progress on an ofuro made by internees, July 2014

According to "Webster's New World Fourth College Edition," a concentration camp is "a prison camp in which political dissidents, members of minority ethnic groups, etc., are confined." Meanwhile, "internment camp" is not in this dictionary. In our post-workday discussion, I concluded that even though "concentration camp" is associated specifically with the German death camps, the definition clearly applies to that of the Japanese American wartime imprisonment, and it should not detract from the hardships experienced by the Issei and Nisei.

In addition to 6 a.m.-to-noon workdays in the field under a warm sun, we spent our afternoons in the local museum, which is run by the Amache Preservation Society, a group comprised mainly of Granada High School students. This part of my journey also stood out as I had never before seen so many heirlooms related to my family's history. I was moved by how the Granada community, as well as my fellow field school classmates, marveled over the artifacts and treated them with such care.

The highlight of the museum work was creating my own exhibit, "What Is Your Story?" assisted by former Granada resident and DU Amache volunteer Carlene Tanigoshi-Tinker. This participatory exhibit was a space dedicated to descendants' and internees' stories relating to Amache, for

June (Suzuki) Mochizuki (center) and Riki Eijima (far right) with Suzuki descendants standing on the family's barracks foundation, 9H7B, at Amache in July 2014

visitors to get a better sense of the life lived there. At the open house, guests added their recollections and comments. I contributed, "Fear can be dangerous. No people should be scapegoated. No one should be jailed without due process."

Recently, I discovered that the nurse's cape I had cleaned and documented in the museum was worn by Fran Kirihara, one of the few Japanese American women to serve during the war. I also learned that she was a good friend of my grandparents. I felt the fullness of community, the commitment to service in the face of discrimination, the connection between generations, the ties that bind. What an honor to have worked with such an important American artifact. Through these experiences, my distant history was no longer so distant.

Last spring, I spoke on a panel sponsored in part by the Sonoma County Chapter Japanese American Citizens League and held at Sonoma State University, regarding my DU Amache experience. Among the panelists were former internees who recounted their camp experiences. They shared the significance of scholarly study and how it allowed them to effectively reclaim their lives. The audience was varied in both age and race, and I was happy to educate others on what happened to the Issei and Nisei during WWII. This research and education is most relevant to counter expressions of hate and acts of violence committed today against groups including Muslim, South Asian,

Sikh, Hindu, Middle Eastern and Arab communities.

Like my grandparents and many other former internees, I feel obligated to fight injustice and uphold the Constitution. I must channel frustration into action — to advocate for the voiceless and against racial injustice. Before we closed our excavation areas, I stepped onto the foundation of the Suzuki family's long-gone barracks with Aunt June Suzuki Mochizuki and my family. Telephoning Grandpa Frank from Block 9H7B was an emotional and memorable moment. I encourage any descendant to visit their family's camp(s). But perhaps even more important is my hope for all Americans to visit Amache and the other internment camps in order to understand the true American experience and hopefully work toward a more just United States of America.

Riki Eijima is a youth member of the San Francisco JACL Chapter. Her mother and grandparents are members of the Livingston-Merced Chapter. The DU Amache field school will commence this summer. Please visit <https://portfolio.du.edu/amache> for more information.



Eijima's museum exhibit for internees and descendants

Amache Digitization Project

Digitizing photographs, artifacts, documents, and memorabilia to preserve the history of WWII Japanese American internment.

AMACHE DIGITIZATION DAY

4/23/16

Do you have Amache related items? Photos, diaries, sketches, handmade jewelry, yearbooks, items created by the silk screen shop, furniture or other crafts and paper items? Bring them to the Amache Digitization Day where they will be digitally preserved so they can be shared for generations to come.

Your items will be scanned or photographed and your stories about each item will be recorded. You will take home your objects as well as digital copies of their photographs and scans.

Walk-ins welcome or you can contact Dama Oyo Shew at shew@sonoma.edu or 707-464-1389 to make an appointment.

WHEN: Saturday, April 23, 10am-4pm
WHERE: Enmanji Buddhist Temple, 1200 Gravenstein Hwy, South, Sebastopol
WHO: Anyone with Amache related items
COST: FREE

The Amache Digitization Project has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for their support.