



PACIFIC CITIZEN

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REDISCOVERING FAMILIAL ROOTS

How a trip to Amache turned into the experience of a lifetime for Athena Mari Asklipiadis and her mother, Susan.

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF ATHENA MARI ASKLIPIADIS

PHOTOS: ATHENA MARI ASKLIPIADIS

Susan (Yahiro) Asklipiadis stands by the original guard tower.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE YAHIRO FAMILY

Amache entrance

Amache camp

MY PILGRIMAGE TO AMACHE AS A YONSEI

JAPANESE AMERICAN

Susan and her brother, Stephen Yahiro, in front of their barrack

The Yahiro family: Rev. George Yahiro, Hatsu, daughter Esther, daughter Eunice EDFN carrying Susan and son Andrew

UDDGD&LRHHU newspaper, May 3, 1944, via the Library of Congress

The original Amache water tower

By Athena Mari Asklipiadis

My mother, Susan (Yahiro) Asklipiadis, was just 1-1/2 years old when she was interned at Camp Amache in Granada, Colo., in 1942. Because her childhood recollections were limited due to her young age, hearing about camp through the stories of her siblings, who were 10 or more years older, was something I began to appreciate more and more over the years.

I would hear how fun it was for my aunts to sneak out to a dance or movie — something their strict minister father was very opposed to. But besides the good times, I would also hear about the lack of privacy in the shared restrooms and the harsh winters or how sand would fly into their barrack and pelt their legs during walks when the wind was strong.

Their storytelling was a mishmash of the good and the bad, but overall, my family mostly saw their internment as just a part of life, something unavoidable. It wasn't until my twenties, though, that I began to take careful mental notes and realize how my family's experiences were a very unique part of U.S. history.

My now-late Uncle Stephen, who had quite the memory, would illustrate his childhood recollections with vivid detail, something I have really begun to miss recently.

He would talk enthusiastically about working for pennies doing farm work, playing sports and how his ride to the Merced Assembly Center when first relocating was so exciting because it was his first time taking a train. He told me he was even the envy of a young naive non-Japanese classmate who told him "he sure was lucky" to be able to ride a train.

The past few years though, I started hearing these types of camp stories less and less. Whether it was because of the passing of older family members or because of the fading

memories of my still-living relatives, I feel like time and opportunity are now escaping us very quickly.

It is sad to think our family history at Camp Amache could certainly be lost forever unless we younger generations take it upon ourselves to preserve it now while we still can.

When my uncle passed away, I came across old Amache reunion shirts and programs when going through his things. One such program had this quote by Amache internee and family friend George Y. Hirano, who said, "Barbed wire, barracks and towers — gone. Now . . . only friendships live on and on."

This place and experience, as difficult as it was, was clearly an important part of understanding the fabric of my family. But somehow, many of the details remained between the internees, a secret of sorts.

I had often heard that other people had gone on pilgrimages to places like Manzanar or Tule Lake over the years, but no one in my immediate family had been on a pilgrimage to Amache yet. Some didn't even know there were Amache pilgrimages until I used good ol' Google and discovered *Amache.org* and the amazing resources available made possible by the Amache Preservation Society.

After doing some hours of online research, I was in awe of all the current efforts being done in Granada, Colo., to not only preserve and excavate the site, but also even reconstruct some parts of the camp so that visitors can see original structures.

APS Founder John Hopper teaches at Granada High School, where he and his students dedicate countless hours each year to the pilgrimage events, operating the Amache Museum and preserving and restoring the campsite.

Leading up the excavation and research side is University of Denver's Dr. Bonnie Clark, who I learned also personally gives tours to Amacheans wishing to visit their barrack's location.

And probably one of the most amazing resources I came across was the Library of Congress' collection of camp newspapers all in digital form online.

Reading archived copies of the *Pioneer*, Amache's newspaper, was an incredible way for me to connect with the lives of my grandparents and aunts and uncles, seeing headlines and articles about their time in camp. It soon became imperative that I had to start docu-

menting my family's stories as soon as possible and make plans to see Amache for myself.

On May 18, my mother and I took a flight to Denver and then a three-hour drive to Granada for the annual Amache pilgrimage on May 19. What struck me the most about the scenery driving there was how flat and desolate the area was.

Seeing miles and miles of open road, I kept repeating, "Wow, there's a whole lot of nothing!" to which my mom replied, "Well that's why they stuck us out here!"

Seeing how far outside of Denver it was and thinking about how long that train ride was from California, I began to immediately feel a sense of sadness. How could the government just pluck Americans out of their comfortable lives and leave them in a deserted field in the middle of nowhere like that? I really cannot imagine the depths of pain and anger adult internees must have felt.

When finally entering Amache, it was such an eerie experience. It was like stepping out of a time machine. The original guard tower, water tower and a recreation hall were all brought back in their original locations, in addition to a barrack replica built recently to exact scale and design. These fixtures evoked so many bittersweet feelings for me.

I was really excited to finally see this part of my history, but it starkly juxtaposed my thoughts of anger that the internees were imprisoned here against their will. I immediately thought about how it was for my family seeing this scenery daily and having to call this place home for three years — the same skies, the same dirt, the same trees, but for them, behind barbed-wire fences with an

Susan (Yahiro) Asklipiadis looks at an overview of Camp Amache.

PHOTOS: ATHENA MARI ASKLIPIADIS

Min Tonai pays tribute to the lives lost at Amache.



Dr. Bonnie Clark with Minoru Imamura at the site of his barrack



Amacheans



The Amache water tower today



Former Amache 12-E residents meet again: Jim Fukui and Susan (Yahiro) Asklipiadis.

unknown release date.

The first event of the pilgrimage was the memorial ceremony at the camp cemetery. Both locals and quite a few visitors from out of town gathered to pray and share memories of Amache.

Min Tonai, a fixture in the JA community and proud Amachean, was among those who shared his thoughts and paid his respects that morning. It was particularly touching for attendees to be able to place a flower at the stone memorial, which features engraved names of 442nd Regimental Combat Team casualties, as well as a written dedication reminding us of the lives lost while interned at Amache — many

of whom were likely babies and the elderly who never saw life again outside of the camp.

Following the memorial service, my mother and I wandered through the cemetery as attendees dispersed to the next destination on the schedule. We scanned the names on the various graves to see if we recognized anyone familiar.

At the last row of graves, we found a man doing the same. I figured he looked around the age of a possible internee, so I asked, “Were you interned here?” He answered yes, and my mom said she was, too. The man, asked, “Which block were you?” And my mom answered, “12-E.” To our surprise, he said he was also from 12-E.

His name was Jim Fukui, and it turned out he knew my mother’s siblings, and he even remembered my late Uncle Stephen, who was close in age. What were the odds that the first internee we would meet was someone from the same block? And then to hear his recollection of my family members was so touching. It instantly reconfirmed why I made the trek out to Granada.

Listening to first-hand stories and understanding how camp life was like from people who actually knew my family is something I could not have easily found without attending this pilgrimage.

It was so emotional to think that we were standing on the grounds where over 75 years prior, my mom was just a baby and this man was just a kid unaware of the significance of their circumstances at the time, but now many years later, fully knowing the weight of that experience on their families and that they would actually become a part of America’s dark WWII history.

After the memorial gathering ended, we made our way to Granada High School for a much-needed light-hearted potluck lunch organized by the school’s Amache Club. It was a larger crowd than what was at the cemetery site.

Former internees and locals socialized over plates filled with sandwiches, inari sushi, potato salad, BBQ chicken wings and spam musubi as they sipped Japanese Ramune soda.

Lunch guests included U.S. Senators and a representative from the office of the Consulate General of Japan, Denver, all of whom spoke

about being dedicated to the preservation of Amache and the importance that history not repeat itself.

The most poignant point of the lunch program was when Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) announced that Bill 2870 was in its first stage of the legislation process, which could potentially turn Amache into a national park. It made my mom and I incredibly touched to see how many wonderful people there were in the state of Colorado who were all working together to make sure the people of Amache and their experiences would never be forgotten.

The event concluded with the presentation of scholarships by the Japanese Association of Colorado to graduating seniors of Granada High who were in the Amache Club.

Following the lunch, my mother ran into another gentleman from block 12-E, Richard Hidaka, who she discovered was the older brother of her preschool camp friend. He traveled from the Chicago area for this pilgrimage. It was really something for my mom to reconnect with old family friends, many of whom had not been in contact since their camp days.

While my mom was reminiscing, I was busy making new friends. During the lunch program, the emcee asked how many in the audience were from the Yonsei generation, and I along with a few others raised our hands. It was heartwarming to see other young people supporting their family legacy by attending the pilgrimage.

It was even more impressive to meet people like Kimiko Marr of the aptly named film production company Hapa Yonsei Productions, who was there to film an internment camp documentary.

Being a fellow filmmaker, and also a hapa Yonsei myself, I had to meet her. I was so excited to hear about her goal in filming at all 10 camps and telling these important stories.

Meeting people like her and John Tonai (Min Tonai’s son), a photographer also documenting internment stories, really encouraged me to continue inquiring about my family’s experiences. Every family has a unique camp story, and I really need to make sure I record ours. I encourage other Japanese Americans of my generation to do the same.

The second half of the day was filled with an amazing tour led by Dr. Clark, who took my mom and I, as well as fellow Amachean Minoru Imamura, 92, and his family, to see the remnants of our families’ barracks. Imamura was not only an internee, but also a 442nd veteran.

While walking to the place of his former barrack, he recollected about his family’s life leading up to camp. He shared that it was filled with promise of a new broccoli farm, but that it was all cut short by internment. His family lost their land, their brand-new tractor and the belongings they did not have time to sell.

Hearing him share his family’s difficulties so matter-of-factly echoed the same tone in which my family speaks of their own hard times. They don’t dwell, they move forward — *shikata ga nai* (it can’t be helped).

I remained in awe as Imamura whizzed through the overgrown weeds and brush, keeping up with the group as Dr. Clark effortlessly pointed out almost invisible building foundations.

My mom and I were so grateful to Dr. Clark for bringing us to what remains of my family’s barrack at 12-E, 2-E and to also see the foun-

ation of Terry Hall, where my grandfather, Rev. George Yahiro, would deliver sermons. Being in the exact spot where my family’s barrack was located was definitely humbling.

As the wind rustled through branches and birds chirped, I tried to imagine the feelings each of my family members must have felt. Their sacrifices and hard work following internment to survive is something I am so proud of when looking at the dusty barren land they rose up from.

Throughout the tour with Dr. Clark, it became clear she knew Amache like the back of her hand, and her deep knowledge of the terrain and the way life was in camp shows how passionate she is about her work.

The endless hours of research and getting to know internees’ stories was obvious in her ability to simply pick up things like a vague looking piece of glass and identifying that it was from an old ketchup bottle in the mess hall. I was also shocked at her ability to recognize various plants, flowers and trees on the grounds, distinguishing which were native to the area and which were planted by internees. She mentioned that her team would like to next reconstruct a garden to resemble the types of plants the internees managed to grow while there.

Dr. Clark is like the Jane Goodall of Amache — she lives and breathes this research, and our community is so blessed to have someone like her preserving our histories.

The pilgrimage ended in the best way — a casual dinner with our new and old Amache friends sitting close together. My mom and her fellow Amacheans also gathered for a group photo. It was incredible to learn that nearly half of this year’s attending internees were from my family’s same block!

Our pilgrimage experience was such a memorable time for my mom and me. We learned so much about Amache thanks to the amazing folks in Colorado like Mr. Hopper and Dr. Clark. It is also incredibly touching to know that many of these Amache supporters are non-Japanese locals who feel strongly about honoring the Japanese American community and its history. These allies and our relationships with them are truly the best gift born out of such a segregated, racist past.

It is also reminiscent of the good stories from my family about the various groups like the Quakers or other noninterned folks who supported and showed love to our community during its most fragile time.

The war did bring out the worst in a lot of Americans, but it also brought out the best in many as well.

The trip also taught me how vital visiting your family’s camp is — a definite must for any Japanese American to understand where you come from. But just as important, it is extremely beneficial for non-Japanese Americans to learn about this part of history as well.

I encourage everyone to take the time to talk to your obachan if she is still living or your Japanese American neighbor who lived in an internment camp and write those stories down. As young JA’s, I truly believe it is our duty to do our part in recording these personal histories so we may never forget and so it is also never repeated.

Athena Mari Asklipiadis, a hapa Japanese L.A. native, is the founder of Mixed Marrow, a filmmaker and a diversity advocate.