

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories
Andy Frazer

Jack Matsuoka: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

Keywords: Japanese-American Internment, Salinas, Poston, Cartoonist, Caricature.

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Oral Histories

Interviewee: Jack Matsuoka (1925-2013)

Interviewer: Andy Frazer

Interview Date: March 12, 2011

Interview Place: Japanese-American Museum of San Jose, California

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Biographical Note: Jack Matsuoka's family was forcibly evacuated from Watsonville, CA at the beginning of WWII. They were shipped to the Salinas Assembly Center, then to the Poston war relocation center in Arizona. Jack became a professional newspaper cartoonist and caricaturist. In 2003, he published [Poston, Camp II, Block 211](#), a collection of his cartoons of his memories of living at the Poston war relocation center. More information about Jack Matsuoka is available in the [Densho encyclopedia](#).

Jack Matsuoka: Well, I was born and raised in Watsonville¹, and when the war² broke out, all the fishermen there, 15 going on 16; it was a shock, it was a shock to the whole family, and a shock to myself when I went to school. Same with the teacher. They weren't exactly happy about it because they kind of tried to ease it up on us. They said, "Oh, you will be back in about a month and you'll be fine". So we had to get out of class for the first part of the week, you know. And I remember the teacher saying, "You'll be back in about a year or so to get back to study after the war is over", but it took three years.

We got a notice, you know, eviction, that we had to be evacuated. [We] had to clear off the property or whatever, and that we did in a couple of days, you know. My dad got picked up [inaudible] I never saw him...[inaudible] picked up then...[inaudible] adult in the family, a family friend came around to help.

I was 15 but I couldn't drive yet, but I still drove, you know, drove them around ...[inaudible] my mother was busy building the mid-wife clinic, for the average farmer , you know? ...[inaudible] when a [inaudible] croaked or a cow, we were right in the center of fixing up the building, but that all went to pot.

So do you know what happened to the building that was supposed to be built in our day? ...[inaudible]lost everything.

They set up all these barracks in the [Salinas] Rodeo Ground. Look, it was pretty crowded you know. I mean the only camp we first went into was near the Salinas

¹ Watsonville, CA

² World War II

Rodeo camp, and that was a barracks.

It was funny, kind of odd, because the ... [inaudible] were kind of Army style. The latrine was terrible, you know, they dug a hole, built up a latrine, like they would have in a farmer's area. We were cultured city folks actually, living in a city.

My father never farmed and my mother's a midwife, so I never had a chance to be close to the farmers, actually. [inaudible] and I picked berries every now and then, but I wasn't exactly up to it.

First of all, you got to train at the Salinas-Watsonville station. They pulled the shade down, can't see nobody from the outside could see the inside, or you can't peep outside. So, we were on dark steel railroad, I guess, it shut down.

We got off the train at the [Salinas] Rodeo Ground, and from then on I went on the bus to, I don't know where we took the bus to, only to the bus station, railroad station in Salinas was exactly the same as going from, what we took from Watsonville.

Everybody was kind of curious about where they were going, they would peek out but nobody could find out where they would end up, you know. End up in Poston, Arizona, Parker Valley and it was hot, man it was hot.

I was pretty good in sports, so freshman year in high school I made my letter. So in camp, I helped out with the coaching.

We had a softball team, hardball team, football team, basketball team, just block by block. We had tournaments, so I kind of think that sports was quite good with the attitude of the Issei.

Because you know, there was a group that was training, studying, in Japan and came back, we called them ["Akibei??"]³. They had their own group. They had their own problems. They couldn't compete against us.

First time we had ever seen a rattlesnake, there were some in California but we never saw any. Every block had a cage with snakes in it: rattlesnakes.

These Issei, our parents had time to go fishing, and when they went fishing, they would run into rattlesnakes. Each time, they bring them into camp; they never got bitten. Then they keep them in the cage, not a very strong cage, but a wire cage.

³ If any readers can clarify the spelling of this phrase, please contact me. –Andy Frazer

And you had a lot of kids going around playing with it, you know. We were scared as hell, but kids in the kindergarten age or around there, they don't care, snakes - they enjoyed seeing them.

You know what another thing is, there were no medicines. If you go to hospital, they would probably give you medicines, bring the fever down. But at camp, whenever you were sick, you had to get over your sickness. I had one bad case of perspiration, high fever, nothing to give for medicine, The older people in that block, they had a whole pond full of fish, carp, you know, ... [inaudible] grabbed one of the biggest ones, poked the throat, spew a lot of blood, you know. I drank two teaspoons of blood, carp blood. Sure enough, my fever disappeared.

The next day, I was, nothing. Then I had to go to camp, because we put in a request for camp and it was about two days later, but then I went to camp and there were doctors, they said my blood was funny, [laughter], my blood was funny.

They didn't know what it is. That was it. [inaudible] That was not for over a year. Nothing wrong with me. I went back on home. You can go back to your parents or go outside of the camp. When I went into the hospital, I was still kind of, you know, no fever, but I then gradually I remember, they put me to sleep. I am still grateful for that carp. Nobody believed me. Right now...They cure everything, that carp, you know.

When I was a sports nut, you know, in high school. I was sketching, they asked me, baseball, football and everything, I never took art lessons. So when we went to into camp, there was no art teacher.

There was one woman there, but she was an Indian⁴, and I don't think she had a class in art at all, she didn't know how to go about fixing up an art class. I never took art there.

So when the time came for us to find, look for a school on the outside, I was at a disadvantage, not having that background for my college education. I was going to Cal⁵, and Cal had their requirements, subjects I had taken.

I took a bit of it before they kicked me out of high school. And then when we went to camp, there was nothing to follow through on that. Look, the only thing we got out of there, was [inaudible], they graduate. But I still have a card, a report card, and the report card is A-B-C-D and there were more D's than B's. It won't get by in this ... We got grades, report cards. I was rejected and I gave up, going, asking for any help.

⁴ I believe Jack was referring to a Native American.

⁵ University of California, at Berkeley.

Actually, we had two camps. Camp 1 had a first choice, at communication with the college outside, Camp 2 and 3 were following whatever they had left behind. I never had any consult or advisor for school, I was trying, had to go to school, on a job with a friend, working in a lumber company, getting by.

The lumber company had to release a lot of people because the war was just about over and the result was they had to discharge me.

But I stayed enough for one semester. But that was just for tuition. I had no place to go, no place to stay. So I did what my father and mother used to do, I guess, when they first came to the United States.

I went to work as a houseboy. I worked weekdays, every night. Washing dishes and cleaning up the place and I had Saturday and Sunday off, fortunately. So I had a place to stay, and a little bit of money, finance, so I wanted to try art school and to try to get in, but they turned me down.

It was the Cleveland School of Fine Arts. It was a good school, and I really wanted to get in there. I got a job at the school there, as a janitor, helping the janitor. I think the janitor liked me. He asked me, "Are you going to be a student here?" I said, "Yes, but I can't get in".

"What happened?" I explained I came from a camp, no schooling, no background. He said, "You can draw". You know, I sketched for him. "You can draw". So he took me up to the schoolmaster, what do you call him, and he showed them my artwork. "Best what you can do is the water color, you know, and watercolor is my favorite. No problem".

I just did whatever he said, and he said, "You're in". That's how I got in, first semester. And second semester, I got what you call, honor student, free, you know, scholarship, yeah right. They gave me a scholarship for the second term.

Funny thing, as soon as the second term started, I got a letter from Uncle Sam: army. They run me out of the camp into another camp, army camp. They sent me to San [inaudible]. Anyhow, basic training was on the outskirts of Indianapolis.

Can't remember the name of the fort, but anyhow. We started there and then moved over to Texas, near Huston for basic training. I was always wondering I was not quite 18 yet, but they asked me where I want to go, I said where ever you want to send me.

You go to medical school, be a dental technician. I was pretty good at that - dental technician. I was pretty good at [being a] dental technician.

Making teeth, you know. The sergeant says stick around, for about a year here, you'll get a ... student grant from the school here and I was happy with that.

Then just when the time came for me to move, the other sergeant called me and says, he gave me a book, Japanese book. Said, read it." I can read Japanese book, I can read kanji, you call it. I can read North South and West and all that, because I played May-Jong and some of the Mah-Jong things was in Japanese. And he said, "Well you should be pretty good at Japanese then".

I can't speak anything, can't do anything, didn't go to school. Well, I went to Japanese school. At Japanese school, I went inside the door, come by the window, back. Can't call it a school. But how did you talk with your parents? I said, oh well I had a big argument with my mother every day.

He said how can you argue with your mother when you can't speak Japanese? Got hooked there...that's how I learned to speak, communicate with my mother, otherwise I never would've... I argued with them, my folks, just about everything.

And in a way, my mother was kind of glad that I could do that, because she said if you can talk like that, you'll be all right, you know. Strict, but understanding, you know.

Sergeant said, well, you [inaudible] in my language school. Sent to Monterey and he said, you'll like Monterey, not necessarily because it is a school, hard school, language school. I'm not qualified for it, but then I go because Watsonville (Ford Ord)... I got a ride home every time.

I got by, I cheated. I got by, into the qualification test, because I had this [inaudible]How I graduated, but he studied Japanese and how Japanese was good Japanese, similar to Japan. And he shoved his paperwork to my side, I just copied.

And I tried writing, I didn't have too much trouble writing. I later found out that, I can read and write, I can read a book but then, but when it comes to writing something from the book, I couldn't do that. [inaudible] top class. I was a book sergeant. They give you a rating. For writing, you volunteer for a certain amount of time in Japan, three months.

Three months I was a sergeant, book sergeant. I was sent to Japan. Occupation. Lot of guys were kind of surprised. You know, six months, three months in the army, and you get a book private, by me a book sergeant. You [inaudible], you get on a ship, you're a sergeant, get a good treatment.

So that's where I started my occupation. And for one year I was an interpreter, strictly interpreter. Then Military Intelligence called me up. I didn't call them up, but they call me up. They were looking for a pretty good linguist for military intelligence. Not a very big deal.

I went to another station in Nagano, prefecture. Japan now is an area that is a hotbed for Communists. I stayed at Nagano City at Matsumoro City, biggest city in Nagano prefecture. Me and my, [inaudible] that only lasted for a half-a-year, and then I was alone there.

And until then, all the documents were signed by him. They asked me to sign it. ... [inaudible] The army records section had a pretty good record of myself. I didn't know whether I did or I didn't but I put out of Pearl Harbor. That's where they put all the [inaudible] boys. They asked me to stick around.

They said there would be officers, qualified to take that, who will give you, send you wherever you want to go: Japan, Korea. Not Korea, but I'll stay in Japan, you know.

After I came...discharged, I went to [inaudible], from there I transferred to Soka University in Tokyo, one of the top universities in ... In daytime I would register as [inaudible] as a daytime student, and then night-time, I went to Soka under the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill had a hard time catching up with me, I am transferring school after school.

[Inaudible] I was pretty broke by then. The check came to me about [inaudible] about half a year later, you know. Until I got the check, I hardly had anything to go on and that's when I started cartooning.

I did a cartoon for a Japanese magazine, Japanese sports magazine, baseball magazine. It went pretty good, I mean, first time I'd been paid for art work, and there was this English publication, publishing office, called me up. It was a Mr. Tuttle. He asked me to illustrate a book. And I did about two, three books for him. Then I did a book, they called it [inaudible] *Rice-Paddy Daddy*, about [inaudible] in Japan.

His idea was that the soldier in Japan have a girlfriend, that the girlfriend and him, the main character, and right then at the same time, *Stars and Stripes* came out, it was a book, similar, about a G.I. and a Japanese girl, from then on, I didn't have too much trouble with my cartoons.

[Inaudible] Nippon Time, Japan Times, another one, they wanted me to ... political cartoons, the Japanese cartoonists, I don't know how they were rated, but then they never had any association with outside, United [States], outside Japan.

As a cartoonist, I was the only one that could, you know, speak English and then American-born, so my idea was stranger from their idea and consequently we would have a [Inaudible] every now and then.

The English papers, the *Japan Times*, English paper, [inaudible], had an English paper, both used my cartoons. But then my best job was sports cartoon. Being a sport cartoonist, only Nisei in area there, in Japan then, so I had a big market to myself. Didn't do much study there so...

I was there on a tourist visa, so the immigration office would go, you're two year...I was married by now, I just got married and my kid was on the way so I thought, fine, may be a good time for me to go back.

And I ended up here in San Francisco. No job. Japanese company I went to, Marubeni-Iida⁶. They hired me right away, you know, they wanted an English-speaking Nisei. They hire me, [Inaudible], reminded me I was part-time.

They kept me for over 14 years, I worked for them. In the meantime, while I was working for Marubeni-Iida, I was doing cartoons. [Inaudible], newspapers. *The Berkeley Gazette*, they used me first, then attributed to me later. [Inaudible]. I started signing [Inaudible], pretty good, most of it. [Inaudible]

And then on the fourth [?] year, I thought about this book, this cartoon. My mother, fortunately, kept all my drawings in camp, she said, "This is all your drawings, you can make a book out of this one."

I looked at it, and it's sloppy drawing, you know, but then still good enough for me to dig up, you know, like the cartoon, like this. So that's the reason, that's how, it came about.

⁶ Marubeni-Iida was an import-export business