

Japanese-American man recalls journey from WWII internment camp to home

By Jared Whitlock

ENCINITAS — In the late 1930s, Tak Sugimoto watched construction workers build the new San Diego High School. A kid at the time, he dreamed of graduating from the school.

The aspiration grinded to a halt in February 1942. Following the Pearl Harbor attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an order calling for the internment of all Japanese Americans living on the West Coast.

By April, then 14-year-old Sugimoto and his family boarded a train in Oceanside with their few remaining possessions. Soon after, the train's doors locked, the windows were shut and armed guards posted at each end.

"It was a feeling of apprehension," Sugimoto said. "We had no idea where we were going to."

Hours later, they arrived at an internment camp with barbed-wire fencing, just south of Parker, Ariz. The scorching hot climate was a far cry from the cool ocean breezes in Encinitas.

"The area was the most desolate you can imagine," Sugimoto said.

Sugimoto grew up on a 40-acre farm where the Magdalena Ecke YMCA stands today. His family, arriving in Encinitas shortly after the Ecke, planted and sold everything from squash to celery. Crops and trees — not streets — ran through most of Encinitas, Sugimoto said.

The southeast truck warehouses of flying down one of the few roads in the area with friends on skateboard-like planks they attached roller skate wheels to. Sugimoto said with a laugh it's proof that Encinitas' skateboard culture goes back a ways.

"We didn't have sophisticated toys," Sugimoto said. "We made our own entertainment."

Injustice, however, lurked around the corner.

Back then, federal immigration laws targeting Asians prohibited Sugimoto's parents from owning the property until one of their sons turned 21 years old. Unfortunately, Sugimoto's older brother was just shy of his 21st birthday when the internment order was issued.



Tak Sugimoto looks down at commemorative bricks at San Diego High School inscribed with notable alumni. Listed among them, his family was forced to leave its Encinitas farm and taken to an internment camp during World War II. Photo by Jared Whitlock

Because the lease went unpaid while they were held, his family lost the land.

Even with the hardship, Sugimoto described his family as stoic throughout.

"Culturally, the Japanese are very authority conscious," Sugimoto said. "When the government or police say you've got to do something, you don't contest it."

Before and after the camp, Sugimoto experienced the xenophobia that gripped the nation when passing through the city of San Diego. For instance, it was common to see signs in front of stores lashing out against the Japanese.

But the racism largely didn't extend to Encinitas, he said.

He got a taste of the community's altruistic nature when Paul Ecke, a German immigrant himself, offered to store his family's 1940 Chevrolet truck in a warehouse before they were forced to leave the community.

"He stuck his neck way out by doing that," Sugimoto said. "With that one truck, we restarted our lives when coming back."

But once in the camp, surrounded by poor living conditions, Sugimoto and his family weren't sure when, or

if they would return to the community. Compounding the hopelessness, Sugimoto's father, who the camp wouldn't admit due to disease, died from Tuberculosis while they were in captivity.

Yet Sugimoto clung to the hope that he could one day graduate from San Diego High. He got that chance when a business teacher at San Diego High, now called San Diego State University, sponsored his return home at the age of 16.

But before Sugimoto could step foot in Encinitas, his homecoming was put to a vote among seniors at San Diego High, he was told. Only one student didn't back him.

"That's when I really knew the community had nothing against me or my family," Sugimoto said teary-eyed. "They hadn't forgotten I was a part of the community way back when."

However, after two years in the camp, it was often difficult to relate to student life. Classmates would discuss earning paychecks for their side-jobs that greatly exceeded the small sum Sugimoto took in while working in the camp.

Also, the terms of his sponsorship prevented him from attending dances and

other extracurricular activities.

And his education and social development lagged behind that of his peers.

"Their maturation was much larger than mine — they had all this freedom I didn't during that period," Sugimoto said.

Regardless, he later became a successful pharmacist, owning and operating La Costa Pharmacy for more than 30 years with his wife Ruth. They sold the store about eight years ago and



Tak Sugimoto's yearbook photo. His quote reads, "There's nothing half so pleasant as coming home again." Photo courtesy of San Diego State University

continue to live in Encinitas.

"I got into the profession because I realized I'm a people person," Sugimoto said. "I liked talking to families when they came into the store and staying in touch with them through the years."

In 1946, Sugimoto's life was upturned again when he was drafted into the U.S. Army and sent to Japan. The irony of being detained and

later ordered to serve his country doesn't escape him.

Yet he said the community's support is one reason he doesn't hold bitterness.

"There are more good people in this world than bad I suspect," he said.

As part of a recent ceremony, the San Diego State University Foundation unveiled bricks at the base of the school's bell tower to commemorate notable graduates. Sugimoto's name is inscribed on one of the pavers. It notes he was the first Japanese-American to graduate after World War II.

His yearbook quote reads, "There's nothing half so pleasant as coming home again."

The standing ovation he received during his graduation ceremony in 1945 sticks out as one of his best memories.

"That was one of the best feelings I ever had — to know I was accepted," Sugimoto said. "And I fulfilled a childhood dream."

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