

HOOD RIVER



Harry Tamura, far right, visits his family at the Tule Lake incarceration camp. The soldier to his left is unknown. Harry served in the U.S. Army during World War II.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LINDA TAMURA

Driving the Past into the Present

Highway 35 renamed to honor Oregon's Japanese-American veterans

By Drew Myron

When is a road more than a passage from place to place? When a group of dedicated citizens comes together to turn a highway into a tribute honoring an underappreciated part of Oregon history.

Oregon Route 35—commonly known as Highway 35—has been dedicated The Oregon Nisei Veterans World War II Memorial Highway. The designation honors Japanese-Americans who served in the U.S. military during World War II.

The 41-mile stretch of road runs from the Columbia River to Highway 26 at Government Camp on Mount Hood.

“It’s an important way to honor the 130 Nisei veterans who served in World War II,” says Linda Tamura, who spent a year championing the effort.

One of those vets was her father.

A third-generation Japanese-American, Linda was raised on her family’s fruit orchard between Pine Grove and Odell.

“They served our country overseas for democracy but were shunned when they returned home,” she says.

About 33,000 Nisei from around the country served in World War II. Of those, more than 130 were Oregon second-generation Japanese-Americans, or Nisei. Nearly half were from the Hood River Valley, living and working on orchards before they served in the war.

Issei refers to first-generation Japanese immigrants. Nisei are second-generation U.S. citizens who were born to Japanese immigrants. Sansei is third generation, and Yonsei is fourth generation.

Before and during the war, many Nisei soldiers were imprisoned in detention camps with their families under a 1942

presidential order following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Executive Order 9066 led to the incarceration of 120,000 people of Japanese descent, many of them born in the United States.

Much like the German concentration camps soldiers were fighting to liberate, the American camps imprisoned Japanese-Americans behind barbed wire with armed guards for as long as three years.

Across the nation, racism reached a fever pitch. In Hood River, newspapers were filled with vitriol against the Japanese. One headline declared, “Japs Are Not Wanted in Hood River” and was signed by hundreds of local residents.

In a blatant act of bigotry, the local American Legion removed the names of 16 Japanese-American veterans from a community honor roll listing local soldiers.

“Within 10 days after Pearl Harbor was



Linda Tamura has dedicated much of her life to raising awareness of the Japanese-American experience in Oregon. She grew up in the Hood River Valley and helped champion the memorial highway project.

bombed, my father—Harry Tamura—volunteered for the Army,” Linda says. “He felt that as an American citizen, it was his duty to protect his country. And that’s where the irony is—those Japanese-American men serving our country while their families were incarcerated.

“This highway is an important way to honor all 130 Nisei veterans from Oregon, five of whom were killed in action. Today we know of just 10 who are still living.”

A retired college professor and prolific author, Linda has dedicated much of her life to raising awareness of the Japanese-American experience in Oregon. She grew up in the Hood River Valley and now lives in Tualatin.

“This is a story I never heard growing up,” she says. “I was astounded when I heard this happened, how they were treated. My family and the Japanese-American community didn’t want to talk about it. They wanted to put it behind them. It’s important to honor them and share their stories. It’s important that we learn how we treated other people, and

Celebrating the Dedication of Highway 35

A dedication celebration is planned for Saturday, August 13, at 1 p.m. at The Ruins, 13 Railroad St. in Hood River, next to the train depot where Japanese-American families from Hood River were forced to depart for incarceration camps. The event is free and open to the public.

to talk about the past because we can’t get away from it. Diversity, inclusion and equity is not just for Japanese-Americans but for all of us. We really need to learn how to get along together.”

Linda deliberately uses the word incarceration rather than internment.

“During the war, the government used euphemisms such as ‘internment,’ ‘relocation,’ ‘temporary assembly center,’” she says. “Even President Biden in his proclamation last month—commemorating 80 years since Executive Order 9066—decried those euphemisms.”

Highway 35 is a significant physical connection bridging past and present because many Japanese families owned or worked on orchards along the highway, notes Anna Goodwin, executive director of The History Museum of Hood River County.

“What this highway memorial does is provide an opportunity to give exposure to those who gave and to focus on their commitment and valor to this community and to the country,” she says.

For Gordon “Gordy” Sato, the highway dedication honors loved ones who never received the recognition they earned.

“The Japanese were here for a better life, and they were willing to die for America, yet they were considered the enemy,” says Gordy, who manages the family orchard in Parkdale and lives in the house his grandparents built in the early 1900s.

During World War II, his father, Ray, was incarcerated.

“This is such an important tribute,” Gordy says.

While many state highways have been renamed to honor military veterans, this is the first to honor Oregon’s Japanese-American veterans.

The effort began in March 2021 with Eric Ballinger, a fourth-generation Japanese-American whose grandparents were forced from their farm and imprisoned. His great-uncle, Shige Imai, was born in Dee and enlisted in the Army following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Shige Imai was one of the names removed from the honor roll. Despite intense racism in the Hood River Valley, he returned to raise a family and worked for Diamond Fruit Growers for 28 years.

“In an effort to prove his loyalty to America, my great-uncle enlisted in the U.S. Army the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor,” Eric wrote in his testimony to the Oregon Legislature supporting the memorial highway. “He was prepared to defend his country without hesitation. I realized that my Nisei grandparents were keepers of a history that needed to be told and shared. Their story is not only about the time spent in American concentration camps, it is one of loyalty and patriotism.”

Eric talked to Dick Tobiason, who has orchestrated eight Oregon highway memorials through his organization, Bend Heroes Foundation. Dick and Eric met with Linda. The three worked together to rally a network of civic, community and political leaders, including Sen. Chuck Thomsen of Parkdale, Hood River Mayor Kate McBride, Hood River County Commission Chair Mike Oates and Rep. Anna Williams of Hood River, who praised the recognition of this underappreciated part of Oregon history.

Nearly 100 people wrote letters of support. Many testified in favor of the proposal during a hearing before the state Senate.

In a bipartisan vote, the Senate and House gave unanimous approval in March 2022. ■