



Ted Nagata

Internee – Topaz

Date Interviewed: 7/27/06

Location of Interview:
Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:
Rick Randle

Rick Randle: Tell us as much as you can, in detail, about the camp and what your thoughts were. You were about twelve years old?

Ted Nagata: No I was about six years old when it started.

Rick Randle: Tell us your name and spell it for us.

Ted Nagata: My name is Ted Nagata. I was in the camp when I was six years old to nine and a half and that's just old enough to remember just about everything about the camp. In fact, after my generation passes on, and I'm 70 years old now, there will be no more eyewitness accounts of Topaz.

Rick Randle: Can you tell us what are your memories about interrupting your life and your family life and going there even as young as you were?

Ted Nagata: Well, strangely enough, I can remember in kindergarten the day after Pearl Harbor and the kids were not very kind to me, and I was too young to really understand fully what was going on. But I know at home there was turmoil and my father was worried about what was going to happen. The government didn't call us. They didn't send us a letter. They merely posted these signs on telephone poles, and this was about February two months after Pearl Harbor. And the signs said, "To all Japanese living on the West Coast, you are to report for evacuation in one week." Those were the dates on there one week. "In the meantime you can only take what you can carry. You cannot take your cars or your homes and so it is up to you to make arrangements to store all of your possessions. This includes homes, cars, real estate." And of course this couldn't be done in a year, let alone a week, so people the government said they would provide facilities to store these items but you have to take sole responsibility if they were to be lost or stolen or damaged. And that was a big statement because our family did put all of our personal possessions into these government warehouses and we, like all the others, lost everything. I mean, there was no coming back to a home. There was no coming

back to get our furniture or anything like that. We lost our home. We lost our car. My father lost his business and all of our personal possessions like radios and furniture and things like that. And that's a story that's not too well known about the internment that people not only lost three and a half years of their life, but they lost all that they had accumulated for all of their life. Some of the internees were farmers from Orange County and many of them lost their acreage. Can you imagine what a hundred acres in Orange County would be worth today? They lost it. And of course, all of this took place so quickly that I mean one week for us to get rid of our property. The signing by President Roosevelt and all of the war time hysteria that led to this all took place so quickly that they didn't have any place to put us. I mean 120,000 people and most were U.S. citizens. Where do you put that many people? That's almost the size of Salt Lake City at that time. Well, of course they weren't all from one area. They came from Southern California all the way up to Washington and they were only people on the West Coast that were affected. The ones that were inland were affected, but they were not incarcerated like we were.

Rick Randle: Let me have you go back to just after Pearl Harbor. You were in kindergarten?

Ted Nagata: Yes.

Rick Randle: And just a young American boy. Can you give us a little bit more detail as to how you were treated and what you thought when you went to school after that incident?

Ted Nagata: Well I do remember that I had one good friend, a Caucasian boy who lived across the street, and he came to me and said how sorry he was that I'd be leaving. I wasn't quite sure what he meant but he seemed to know more about it than I did. When I went to school I can remember there were names called at me and it wasn't a pleasant time for any Japanese of any age.

Rick Randle: Did your parents tell you that might happen when you went to school?

Ted Nagata: No. It all happened so quickly I don't think they knew what was coming. The government never told us where we were going or how long it was going to be. But when they told us to dispose of our homes and our property that kind of gave us a pretty good idea that we weren't going to be coming back soon. You know the irony of this whole thing was because of the wartime hysteria, we were considered to be the enemy. Why? Because we looked like the enemy. That, built on with the wartime hysteria just brought all of this. I mean there was no question in congress whether we should do this or not. There were, believe it or not, the FBI was against it, but there were many that just seemed to steamroll this right through, that we could be potential espionage agents and the government said, well they didn't say this publicly, but we know this is there thinking that we can't tell which of you are the spies and which of you aren't, so to make things easier, we'll just take all of you. And when they said, "all" that meant 120,000 Japanese.

Rick Randle: What city were you in, in California?

Ted Nagata: I was born in Santa Monica, California but our family moved to the bay area in Berkeley and that's where we lived when we were incarcerated.

Rick Randle: Take it from there. What happened? Did you go by bus and did you have to congregate somewhere?

Ted Nagata: Because of the swiftness of events, they gave us one week to get all of our possessions and line them up on the street where buses would take us to a temporary holding center. Those temporary holding centers turned out to be race-tracks and fair-grounds, and it was our unfortunate circumstance to be put into a horse-stall, and we lived in this horse-stall for about two months. The floor looked like a horse had just left and there was straw on the floor. We had an Army cot with metal springs in it and a mattress made out of hay. Mercifully, the government only had us stay there two months,

and then they found barracks inside the race-track that they were building at the time. These barracks were just one big room with two to three families in each barrack, and of course there was no privacy, so we put up string on the ceiling and hung sheets over the string. Those were our walls of privacy.

Rick Randle: What about the sanitation?

Ted Nagata: The sanitation is a little vague to me in Tanforan, but in Topaz I have to tell youY Topaz was divided into 42 blocks and there were about 225 people per block. The blocks were about the size of Salt Lake City blocksCthey were quite large. And the bad thing is there was only one latrine and one shower facility for all 225 people. The bathroom was one big room about 20 x 20 and they had 12 toilets lined up side by side. I mean there were no walls between them and for people who lived in San Francisco who were quite culturally awareCI mean this was a huge shock to them and they were just not used to living this way. The showers were the same wayCone big room with about 20 shower heads and it was not pleasant. I can remember the worst thing was to have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Since there was no running water in the barracks, we had to walk a football field to the latrine and then a football field back and there was usually snow on the ground, so it wasn't pleasant.

Rick Randle: Lets go backY you went from the horse stall to the barracks. Lets take it from there.

Ted Nagata: Well we were put in the Tanforan race track as a temporary holding place while the ten internment camps were being built and they were built throughout the Western states away from the coast. They were in California, Arizona, Utah, Wyoming, and there was even one way back in Arkansas. But after about six months the ten internment camps were ready. Now each internment camp had it's own race track. They didn't all come to the same one soY six months they put us onto a train and told us to keep all of the blinds down so, I don't know, I guess it was for our own protection or something. The train took us to Delta, Utah and they loaded us onto Army trucks in

Delta and there was a 16-mile ride from Delta straight out into the desert, and that was our first glimpse of Topaz. All you could see was flat land. The best way to describe Topaz is barren. It had no trees. It had no mountains nearby. It was completely filled with sagebrush and dusty and windy and the temperature were 100+ in the summer and below zero in the winter time and our barracks had one 1" pine board with tar paper on the outside and a layer of sheet rock on the inside and that was the insulation. Each apartment had a pot-bellied stove and we'd have to walk two football fields to get the coal, There was electricity in the units but no running water and nobody could eat in the barracks. They all had to go over to a central mess hall to eat. The food was so soY it wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either.

Rick Randle: How many were in your family?

Ted Nagata: There were four of usY two children, myself and my sister, one year older and my two parents and it was a hard time for my family, more so than most families. My Mother had a hard time adjusting to Topaz and she never fully recovered from it. And as a result, when we got out of Topaz three years later, we had \$25 from the government and they drove us to the UP Depot. I remember walking over the train tracks and I remember my father couldn't tell us where we were going to stay. We eventually stayed in a 10 x 10 foot tenement kind of apartment and ironically it was located right where the Salt Palace is now. Twice a week a lady would come in and check on to just see how we were. But up until just recently I didn't realize that we were a welfare family at that time. I would walk out around that Salt Palace neighborhood and there was one café, it was called Jimmy's Café and I noticed that they had a big sign in the window and it said, "No Japs." I have to chuckle a little bit because that very same building is now the Ginza restaurant, a Japanese restaurant. Then after that tenement room my father was trying to get settled and find work and a place for us to live. My sister and I spent a year at St. Ann's Orphanage, which I might add was a very good experience from what we came from. Those were the early days after we got out.

Rick Randle: Were you treated with derision even from '46-'50?

Ted Nagata: Oh yes. I was called all kinds of names in Jr. High and High School. I think there was still some sentiment about the Japanese people that they didn't quite fully accept us. As time went on and I got into college, things got much much better. Today I feel like part of the community.

Rick Randle: So your parents stayed in Utah then after St. Ann's, what did you do?

Ted Nagata: Well, we found an adobe house that happened to be a pioneer house, I found out later, on the West side. I went to Jackson Jr. High there and then on to West High. Those days were fun. I had good friends and I don't have any bad memories. Eventually I worked at the Hotel Utah parking garage during the midnight shift and I could study my college work while I was working, so that worked out pretty good. Eventually both my sister and I graduated and she's a nurse now and I'm a graphic artist. You know ironically the whole premise of this incarceration was because the Japanese-American people could not be trusted and they could very easily be espionage agents for Japan. I mean, if that was the whole thesis of it, twenty-five years after the war ended, not one case of espionage ever came even to trial against any of the 120,000 internees. I thought that was very ironic.

Rick Randle: To say nothing of the heroic efforts of the young men who joined our Army and Air Force and other services for their country.

Ted Nagata: You know it was in Topaz camp that the government allowed the boys to volunteer for the service. Later on they liked them so much they drafted the boys at the camps. The main reason these boys joined the U.S. Army was to show their loyalty to the country. As you may know, they went on to become one of the bravest and most decorated units in the entire U.S. Army history.

Rick Randle: Can you share some more details about the Topaz camp that we haven't covered?

Ted Nagata: When we first got into Topaz, it's true they had barbed wire all the way around the camp and they had guard towers and they had guards in them with guns, and in fact, one old gentleman who was deaf was walking along the fence and the guard told him to stop, and of course he couldn't hear him, and the guard shot him and he died. That was the only incident like that. It never ever happened again. But it caused quite a stir among the people there. And then another aspect of the Topaz security was, only after 4-6 months, the government realized that we were not espionage agents. We were not the enemy. We were just ordinary U.S. citizens. So they really let down on security and the guard towers were always empty. There were no soldiers up there. There were no guns. In fact, we as children would walk up to the guard houses and play, and anytime we wanted to go through the barbed wire and go for a ten mile hike, we could do it. In fact, our classes took us for hikes out into the desert. So I think it became clear to the government that, in a very short time, this could have been a major mistake.

Rick Randle: What was the worst time--the winter or the summers?

Ted Nagata: I think they all their good and bad points. Of course in the summer time it got over 100° and there weren't any trees for shade and the wind storms were a big item there. The barracks were so flimsily made that the dust would just come right through the floors, and everything in your apartment would be covered with dust. But one of the good things was, we'd go out into these hikes and collect horny toads and lizards and killdeer. That was kind of a bird we used to chase. Once in a while we'd have a barbeque out in the desert there and have steaks and I remember those good times. People even swam in those dirty canals.

Rick Randle: Did the children get together and play games?

Ted Nagata: Oh yes, not only the children, but the adults. I mean athletics was a big thing in Topaz. Baseball against Delta High School was a big item and we played basketball against some of the top teams from Salt Lake City. In fact, I remember one

game when the all-stars from the Japanese in Salt Lake came to play the all-stars in Delta, and we had a central gymnasium where they could play. Right now there is a movie being filmed in Utah, and it's just about wrapping up now, but it tells about this Japanese team from Posten(?) who went on to beat the High School champs of Arizona. That was quite a game I hear.

Rick Randle: What about medical care?

Ted Nagata: Medical care was probably the best in the State. The reason I say that is because it didn't matter whether you were an attorney or the top engineer in your class or the top medical student in your class, or your hospital that you were working in. You were an intern. Nobody had an exception. So, as a result, the finest doctors of Japanese decent all along the coast ended up in these internment hospitals, and also the best technicians and the best nurses. As a result, Topaz had without a doubt some of the best medical facilities and care.

Rick Randle: At six years old how did your mother communicate to you what was happening with the drastic change in your life?

Ted Nagata: Well I can't remember specific conversations but I do remember there was turmoil in our house and they took all of our cameras and radios away even before we were interned. I could just tell from the things that were happening in school, and some of the names I was called, and of course the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, that pretty much told me what was happening. But I think one of the hardest things was nobody knew what was going to happen to us. I mean, were we going to be taken away for one year or ten years or forever? And what about our property and possessions? I mean is it like the end of our life right now? Nobody seemed to know that and the government wouldn't tell us.

Rick Randle: It's hard to imagine that experience.

Ted Nagata: This evacuation or incarceration of 120,000 Japanese-Americans is regarded by many historians as the biggest breach of our constitution on any group of people. It's an embarrassment and likewise it's not readily taught in schools.

Rick Randle: That's true. I hope this interview will bring some information to future generations so we don't make the same mistake.

Ted Nagata: And it's really close to happening with all of this Mid-East turmoil.

Rick Randle: How did the adults group get into communities and cope?

Ted Nagata: Boredom was a big issue because people who had worked hard all of their lives suddenly had nothing to do, and so many of the men actually got jobs in the Price mines and in the sugar beet farms. I know my father was gone for three or four months at a time topping sugar beets. That took a lot of their time. Many of them grew gardens where they could actually make things grow in that alkali soil. I don't know how they did it, but they had some beautiful gardens. And many of them spent time building furniture because the government didn't supply any furniture whatsoever except for the beds and army blankets. They built these beautiful dressers and chairs out of building crates and many of them are still around. As far as the ladies go, they took to crafts. A lot of them built seashell ornaments. My wife has a dozen or so. They're just beautiful little birds or things that were built from shells that they found right in the area there. For the kids, I think like me, in a strange sense, it was a big adventure. We didn't realize what was going on fully, but to the kids it was a big adventure. Hardly any school and they could just run around and do whatever they wanted. And that's maybe one of the reasons why I can talk about Topaz. I was not involved with the emotional side of it at 8 yrs old, but I think there are many adults who would hesitate to talk publicly about it because it was such an emotional strife on them.

Rick Randle: I know they had meetings, internee reunions. Is there a lot of resentment to the point that they can never get over it, or is there an attitude of forgiveness?

Ted Nagata: I think the general feeling is one of forgiveness. There are just a few that are resentful today. I think for the most part, the Japanese have taken this as (they have a Japanese word for it), but it was just something that couldn't be avoided and it just happened so you have to live with it. By and large, I think it's a thing of the past. As far as my own personal opinion goes, there is no country in the world that I'd rather live in than America.

Rick Randle: What's amazing to me is to see how successful you and the other Japanese-Americans basically have become when everything was taken away.

Ted Nagata: That's a whole other story that we don't have time to talk about but they came from absolutely nothing and built their lives and put this episode behind them.

Rick Randle: Can you speak to the cultural differences, and the shock of the Japanese-Americans having to adapt to the facilities there?

Ted Nagata: Well you have to realize that people from the bay area are pretty sophisticated people and arts and culture was very high to them, and many of them were quite wealthy. To be put into a room where you had to use bathroom facilities side by side with complete strangers, it was just something they were not used to. Eventually the internees built stalls but only after the government wouldn't do it, they took it upon themselves to do it.

Rick Randle: Were the men separate from the women?

Ted Nagata: Oh yes! There was a big laundry room where everybody had to do their laundry and there was one big coal pile next to the latrine where everybody had to come and get their coal and there was one-block manager's office where each block had a

manager with a couple of assistants and he would do all of this work in this little tiny office.

Rick Randle: What about showers?

Ted Nagata: The showers were just a big room and they just had showers coming down and people had no stalls in between. One of the biggest things about showering was scorpions. You would not be surprised to see a scorpion drop down every so often from the rafters.

Rick Randle: Now your sister was a year older?

Ted Nagata: A year older than I was.

Rick Randle: I'll bet you that her experiences probably differed. It would be harder for a young girl growing up than a young boy I would think.

Ted Nagata: Her personality is quite different than mine. I don't think she has ever publicly spoken about it.

Rick Randle: What did the internees do to make the situation more livable?

Ted Nagata: You know, I told you it was very dusty and they put skirts around the bottom of the barracks so that the wind could not carry the dust into the apartments, and they built wallsCsheetrock walls, inside the apartments so there was a little more sense of privacy there.

Rick Randle: Did two families have to occupy an apartment?

Ted Nagata: No, just one family per apartment, and they had different sized apartments. Some were large and some were made for just a single bachelor.

Rick Randle: And I understand you only had just one bedroom in each apartment?

Ted Nagata: Well they had as many beds as they could put in one room, yes. And as I said before, they had one pot-bellied stove and that was all of the heat you had.

Rick Randle: You know the hardest part would be the thoughts of the mother and father knowing they have to raise their babies and protect them. It probably was so hard they couldn't talk about it.

Ted Nagata: Well it was one thing to be incarcerated, but to be able to put up with it was another thing.

Rick Randle: What would you say to future generations about the lessons learned here?

Ted Nagata: I think there is no question that this is one of the worst constitutional blemishes ever, and because we're going through the same thing with the Mid-East situation, it is so easy to gather people at Guantanamo and people in airports who look mid-eastern and giving them more scrutiny than perhaps other people. Anyway, whatever happened in Topaz should never happen again to any group of people as a group.