

# **Fort Sill and the Incarceration of Japanese “Enemy Aliens” during World War II**

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[This essay is based on old research notes for my book *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War* (Harvard University Press, 2019). Given the June 11, 2019 announcement by the Department of Health and Human Services that up to 1,400 unaccompanied asylum-seeking migrant children will be transferred from border detention facilities in Texas to Fort Sill, Oklahoma – a former WWII internment camp that held 700 persons of Japanese ancestry – this essay is an attempt to provide some historical background to why so many Japanese Americans and others have been raising their voices in solidarity with these children. I invite any comments or questions at [duncan@duncanryukenwilliams.com](mailto:duncan@duncanryukenwilliams.com) ]

## **I. Fort Sill as a Confinement Site for Japanese “Enemy Aliens”**

While there have been a number of critical histories of Fort Sill as a prisoner-of-war camp for Chiricahua Apache tribal members or the connection of its Indian School to forced assimilation efforts, there has been no scholarly treatment of this site as part of the literature on the WWII incarceration of the Japanese American community.<sup>1</sup>

The scholarship on the confinement sites associated with the mass incarceration of the Japanese American community residing on the Pacific Coast – the euphemistically named “Assembly Centers” and the ten War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps – is very extensive, but the temporary detention centers and internment camps run by the U.S. Army and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)/Department of Justice (DOJ) that housed thousands of Japanese “enemy aliens” during WWII have only received paltry attention.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the Native American forced removal, imprisonment, and assimilation practices at Fort Sill, see John Anthony Turcheneske, *The Chiricahua Apache Prisoners of War: Fort Sill 1894-1914* (University of Colorado Press, 1997), Alicia Delgado, ed. *From Fort Mason to Fort Sill: A Documentary History of the Chiricahua Apache Prisoners of War, 1886-1913* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), and Sally J. McBeth, “Indian Boarding Schools and Ethnic Identity: An Example from the Southern Plains Tribes of Oklahoma,” *Plains Anthropology* 28/100 (1983): 119-128.

<sup>2</sup> These internment camps also held German and Italian nationals rounded up in the custodial detention program. A handful of U.S. citizens – mainly Kibei from Hawaii – were also housed in these Army and INS/DOJ camps; a group that included number of U.S.-born Buddhist and Shinto priests. Separately, we should note that a substantial number of Japanese Latin Americans were also forcibly imprisoned in these camps.

What research exists naturally focuses on the confinement sites that held larger populations and operated for longer durations such as the DOJ-run Santa Fe Internment Camp (NM), the U.S. Army-run Lordsburg Internment Camp (NM), and the DOJ-run Crystal City Internment Camp (TX).<sup>3</sup> Of the smaller sites, the Kooskia Internment Camp (ID) and Camp Livingston (LA) have been the subject of some research.<sup>4</sup> Further, studies on the initial temporary INS/DOJ-run confinement sites for “enemy aliens” – such as the Tuna Canyon Detention Station (CA), Fort Lincoln (Bismarck, ND), and Fort Missoula (MT) – as well as the network of camps on the Hawaiian Islands (including Sand Island and Honouliuli) have thankfully emerged in recent times.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The most-extensive primary source for understanding life in the Santa Fe and Lordsburg Internment Camps is the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist priest, Daishō Tana’s roughly 1600-page diary, published in four volumes in Japan: *Santa Fe, Lordsburg senji tekikokujin yokuryūsho nikki* (Sankibō Busshōrin, 1976). A partial English translation has been completed by Duncan Ryūken Williams (forthcoming). For a general study on all of the camps in New Mexico – Santa Fe, Lordsburg, Baca Camp (Old Raton Ranch), Fort Stanton – see Sarah R. Payne, ed. *Confinement in the Land of Enchantment* (Confinement in the Land of Enchantment [CLOE] Project, 2017). On the Santa Fe Internment Camp, see John J. Culley, “The Santa Fe Internment Camp and the Justice Department Program for Enemy Aliens,” In *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress* Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry Kitano, ed. (University of Washington Press, rev. ed., 1991), 57-71; Richard Melzer, “Casualties of Caution and Fear: Life in Santa Fe’s Japanese Internment Camp, 1942–46,” In *Essays in Twentieth-Century New Mexico History* Judith Boyce DeMark, ed. (University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 213-240; Gail Okawa, “Finding American World War II Internment in Santa Fe: Voices Through Time,” In *Telling New Mexico: A New History* Marta Weigle, ed. (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009), 360-373 and “Ironies of World War II: Hawai’i Japanese Internee Fathers and American Military Sons in Santa Fe,” In *Sunshine and Shadows in New Mexico’s Past* Richard Melzer, ed. (Rio Grande Books/Historical Society of New Mexico, 2010), 161-171. And on Lordsburg Internment Camp, see John J. Culley, “Trouble at the Lordsburg Internment Camp,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 60/3 (1985): 225-248.

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive study of Kooskia in Idaho is Priscilla Wegars’ *Imprisoned in Paradise: Japanese Internee Road Workers at the World War II Kooskia Internment Camp* (Caxton Press, 2010). Camp Livingston is the subject of a major research effort based at Louisiana State University led by two librarians Hayley Johnson and Sarah Simms (separately, Marilyn Miller at Tulane University is spearheading a research project on Camp Algiers and its connection to the Enemy Alien Control Program that brought Japanese Latin Americans through Louisiana).

<sup>5</sup> Tetsuden Kashima’s *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II* (University of Washington Press, 2003) is an important general work to tackle the Army and DOJ-run internment camps. On Tuna Canyon, there is the publication issued in conjunction with a traveling exhibit “Only the Oaks Remain: The Story of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station.” On Fort Lincoln and Fort Missoula, see John Christgau, *Enemies: World War II Alien Internment* (San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press, 2001) and Carol Van Valkenburg, *An Alien Place: The Fort Missoula, Montana, Detention Camp 1941-1944* (Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1995/2009). The Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai’i (JCCH) has spearheaded the research on Sand Island, Honouliuli, and other camps on the Hawaiian islands with the release of a documentary film “The Untold Story: Internment of Japanese Americans in Hawai’i” and a translations series of Japanese-language memoirs by former internees including Yasutaro Soga’s *Life Behind Barbed Wire: The World War II Internment Memoir of a Hawaii Issei* (2008); Gail Honda’s *Family Torn Apart: The Internment Story of the Otokichi Muin Ozaki Family* (2012);

The Fort Sill Internment Camp (OK) lacks a single monograph, article, or even a journalistic piece. This is most likely because this camp held the Japanese “enemy aliens” for only a brief period of time (April-May 1942), which therefore generated a smaller archive of government/military records and internee records (diaries, correspondence, memoir, oral histories). As with research on the other Army and INS/DOJ camps, another structural barrier to research appears to be that extant materials – what diaries, memories, correspondence might exist – are Japanese-language documents, which have historically been under-utilized in the field of Japanese American studies.

## **II. Three Waves of Transfers to Fort Sill in April 1942**

It is well established that Japanese internees experienced multiple, and often sudden, transfers between numerous camps during their wartime incarceration. After a brief imprisonment at a local city/county jail, U.S. Army, or INS detention facility, the typical pattern was: a] for those on the Hawaiian Islands, transfer to a mainland camp on one of 10 ships that transported the Japanese out of the Sand Island Internment Camp OR confinement at the Honouliuli Internment Camp on Oahu and b] for those in the continental U.S., a transfer to a temporary detention facility and then on to a U.S.-Army run internment camp such as Fort Lincoln (ND) or Fort Missoula (MT) for several months as their individual enemy alien hearings determined their custodial release, parole, or indefinite internment.

Fort Sill operated as an internment camp for the short period from early April to late May 1942 after most enemy alien hearings had concluded for those deemed enough of a national

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and Suikei Furuya’s *An Internment Odyssey: Haisho Tenten* (2017). There is also a forthcoming book by Gail Y. Okawa, *Internment and Exile: Hawai’i Japanese Immigrants in World War II and a Granddaughter’s Quest* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2020). A special issue of the journal *Social Process in Hawai’i* (Vol. 45, 2014) focuses on the Honouliuli Internment Camp – Suzanne Falgout and Linda Nishigaya, ed. *Breaking the Silence: Lessons of Democracy and Social Justice from the World War II Honouliuli Internment and POW Camp in Hawai’i*.

security threat that, unless they had a rare re-hearing due to family petitions, would experience the war years in multiple confinement sites. Indeed, most of the men who went through Fort Sill would experience imprisonment in 3-8 different camps until their release at the war's end (only a handful were able to rejoin their families in the DOJ-run Crystal City Internment Camp and an even smaller number in post-segregation Tule Lake).<sup>6</sup>

Japanese nationals designated “enemy aliens” arrived at Fort Sill in three major transfers in April 1942: 1) the Hawai‘i group; 2) the Japanese Panamanian group, and 3) the continental U.S. group transferred from Fort Missoula (MT).

The first group to arrive were those who had been picked up on the various islands of Hawai‘i immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack and gathered at Sand Island Internment Camp on Oahu. Ten ships transferred 702 Japanese community leaders residing on the islands to the mainland. The group that landed in San Francisco after departing Honolulu on March 19, 1942 – and headed thereafter to Fort Sill, Oklahoma – came on “Ship 2” with 166 individuals.<sup>7</sup> Within this Hawai‘i group, there were 85 Buddhist priests and several more Shinto priests – reflecting the two religious groups that were targeted by the FBI and military intelligence agencies – who

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<sup>6</sup> There is only one case I know of where an individual in Fort Sill was able to be paroled out – Takeshi Ban (1902-1986) – the only Christian (Congregationalist) minister imprisoned in the Oklahoma camp.

<sup>7</sup> In Soga's *Life Behind Barbed Wire*, Appendix 2 [Internees Sent to the Mainland by Island] breaks down the transfer of the 702 individuals on the ten ships. See Yasutaro Soga's *Life Behind Barbed Wire: The World War II Internment Memoir of a Hawaii Issei* (Honolulu: Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai‘i/University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 226. Appendix 5 of the same publication lists the individuals either transferred or remaining on the islands in Honouliuli by “group” or “ship number.” We should also note that Otokichi Ozaki states that there were 167 internees in the Hawai‘i group, but I have decided to go with Soga's account because he seems to base his number on passenger lists of the ten ships, while Ozaki's number is an off-hand statement made on the radio post-war. See Gail Honda's *Family Torn Apart: The Internment Story of the Otokichi Muin Ozaki Family* (Honolulu: Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai‘i/University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012), 68.

had been serving various temples and shrines on the islands.<sup>8</sup> This group arrived at Fort Sill on April 9, 1942.<sup>9</sup>

The second group to arrive were Japanese Panamanians, who entered the Fort Sill Internment Camp on April 11, 1942. They had been initially rounded up by the Panamanian government on behalf of the United States beginning on December 7, 1941 (within 20 minutes of the announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack according to Edwin C. Wilson, the U.S. Ambassador to Panama). Indeed, by December 12, 1941, Ambassador Wilson notified Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles that Panamanian authorities that rounded up all Japanese men, women, and children (as well as male German and Italian Panamanians).<sup>10</sup> After their internment in the Canal Zone and turn over to U.S. authorities, most of the Japanese Panamanian internees (sources estimate their numbers to be anywhere from 185 to more than 300) were sent to the continental U.S.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the third group transferred to Fort Sill were those rounded up on the continental U.S. who had already spent months in Fort Missoula (MT). They arrived in Oklahoma several days after the Panamanian group.<sup>12</sup> This group totaled 346 community leaders (including

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<sup>8</sup> “Takahashi (Reverend Seytsu), Dept. of Justice Internment Camps, Internee Experience,” Oral History 1616, interview conducted December 16, 1978 by Mariko Yamashita and Paul F. Clark (California State University Fullerton, Oral History Program, Japanese American Project), [http://texts.cdlib.org/view?docId=ft6290068d&doc.view=entire\\_text](http://texts.cdlib.org/view?docId=ft6290068d&doc.view=entire_text).

<sup>9</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson’s memos to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull have been unearthed by Lika C. Miyake. She details the Panamanian round up in “Forsaken and Forgotten: The U.S. Internment of Japanese Peruvians during World War II,” *Asian American Law Journal* 9 (January 2002): 163-193. Her argument is that the Panamanian internment provided a template for subsequent larger roundups such as in Peru.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Robinson and Maxine Minne note that the *New York Times* that the time reported that “57 Japanese in Colón were delivered to US authorities, and 114 more were expected from Panama City.” And that *Newsday* stated that some 300 Japanese in the Canal Zone were being interned indefinitely as enemy aliens, while the Chicago Daily News reported that 185 Japanese were interned in the Canal Zone. See Greg Robinson and Maxine Minne, “The Unknown History of Japanese Internment in Panama,” *Discover Nikkei* (April 26, 2018); <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2018/4/26/japanese-internment-panama/>

<sup>12</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 68.

newspaper editors, businessmen, Buddhist priests, consular assistants, and Nihonjinkai officials) from around the U.S. including the East Coast.<sup>13</sup>

With the 166 from Hawai'i, the roughly 200-strong Japanese Panamanian group, and the 346 individuals from the continental U.S., and, we can conclude that Fort Sill held a little over 700 Japanese nationals deemed “enemy aliens.”<sup>14</sup> Curiously, a handful of Japanese Americans (U.S. citizens) had also spent time at Fort Sill, but not as incarcerated. As a historically well-known base for the U.S. military’s artillery training, Nisei who had been drafted into the U.S. Army before the outbreak of the war spent time training at Fort Sill. They included Masami Samuel Yoshinari (b. 1917 in The Dalles, Oregon) who had been inducted in January 1941 as a volunteer attached to the 144th Field Artillery Regiment at Fort Lewis, WA and after basic training, ended up at Fort Sill to attend its Artillery School before returning to Washington State (he would eventually become a part of the famed 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team and serve in the Italian, French, and German campaigns).<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, pre-war draftees James H. Kurata (born in Lodi, California in 1918 and a member of the Buddhist Church of Lodi; inducted in September 1941) and Shigeo J. Takayama (b. 1918 in Pasadena, California; inducted in May 1941) were present at Fort Sill during the period when the Japanese internees were in a different section of the military base. Kurata was at Fort Sill training to lead artillerymen from early 1942 until February 1943, while Takayama was attached to the reception center in charge of inductions (for example, overseeing typing and

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Van Valkenburg includes an Appendix listing a photocopied list from DOJ files first opened to the public in 1985 that alphabetically lists the 346 names of this group. The header for this DOJ list is “Japanese Interned at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, From Fort Missoula, Montana”. See Carol Van Valkenburg, *An Alien Place: The Fort Missoula, Montana, Detention Camp 1941-1944* (Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1995), 102-108.

<sup>14</sup> In terms of the total, we know that roughly 700 attended the funeral of Kanesaburo Oshima on May 13, 1942 but this does not account for a small contingent of the Hawaii group that had already left Fort Sill for Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. Therefore, we can estimate that the Panama group was some number above 200.

<sup>15</sup> Masami Samuel Yoshinari, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/resources/military/15529/>

dictation tests and scoring aptitude tests) from March 1942 to July 1943. Takayama recalled that during his time at Fort Sill, the “nisei personnel were denied promotions and restricted on passes to 40 miles from the post.”<sup>16</sup>

### **III. Entering Fort Sill as Enemy Aliens**

The destination  
Closer and closer  
ID tag removed from my back  
How light I feel!

Otokichi Ozaki (Lawton, Oklahoma train station; April 9, 1942)<sup>17</sup>

Among the first arrivals at Fort Sill on April 9, 1942 was Otokichi (Muin) Ozaki, an accomplished poet, a Japanese language teacher, a consular agent, and a teacher at the Hilo Higashi Honganji Mission’s Ōtani Kondeidan (a Buddhist club at the temple for “vigorous young men” of the sect) from the Big Island.

His poem, written after the roughly 2,000-mile and 3-day train journey from San Francisco (where the Hawai‘i group had been detained at Angel Island Immigration Station from March 30 to April 7, 1942), refers to the “eight-by-twelve inch denim ID tag” pinned to the back of his collar that had been assigned to him there.<sup>18</sup> His feeling of relief that by arriving at Fort Sill at the end of a long journey from Hawai‘i to Oklahoma he would be treated as someone more than just a number was a short-lived one.

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<sup>16</sup> For brief summaries of the military careers of James Kurata and Shigeo Takayama, see <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/resources/military/247/> and <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/resources/military/528>

<sup>17</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Grant Din, “Angel Island Was One of Eight Detention Centers for Otokichi Ozaki,” *Discover Nikkei* (April 27, 2015) - <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2015/4/27/5736/>

The Fort Sill check-in at the makeshift medical clinic was a shock for Ozaki. Thinking the initial processing consisted of a routine medical check-up, he soon found himself:

stripped naked. When told to hold out my chest, I thought I was to be inoculated. Instead, the number “111” was written in red ink across my entire chest. An overwhelming sense of anger came over me. Large numerals written directly on my skin in red as though I am an animal – how can a civilized country like America do such a thing? It made me feel very sad. That night I took a shower and tried to scrub off the numbers with soap, but they did not come off easily. I still recall that one of my fellow internees complained about [the Americans’] uncivilized acts, saying they had treated us like cattle or horses.<sup>19</sup>

The other thing that disturbed Ozaki was the treatment of his belongings. He had looked forward to finally reuniting with his suitcases that he had prepared back on the Big Island, which had been confiscated by the U.S. Army with assurances of their return upon arrival at a mainland internment camp. But at Fort Sill, he noted, “All of them [suitcases] had been forced open, the locks broken, with most of the contents missing. At the time I still remembered what I had packed, so I promptly made out a list and submitted it to the authorities. My continued efforts to negotiate some form of compensation were in vain. I still have a copy of the twenty-three-page typed list of items, which were valued at a few thousand dollars.”<sup>20</sup>

Rev. Seytsū Takahashi (head priest of the Koyasan Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles and Bishop of the Shingon Buddhist tradition in North America) arrived at Fort Sill several days later. He was on the FBI’s list to be arrested on December 7, but had been on Terminal Island visiting families associated with his temple on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, so was put in custodial detention the following day. Before his arrival in Oklahoma, he spent ten days in the Los Angeles County Jail before his transfer to Fort Missoula (MT) and then onto Fort Sill. During the initial four-day train ride from California to Montana, the Japanese were prohibited

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 51.

from speaking to each other and were told they would be shot if they lifted the blinds. On the second day of the trip, one man tried to commit suicide by biting off his tongue. Rev. Takahashi was among those who helped the man. In pitch darkness he found a toothbrush for him to bite down on for the pain and applied a towel to stop the bleeding.<sup>21</sup>

About his arrival at Fort Sill, Takahashi recalled:

The second camp we went to was Fort Sill in Oklahoma. The camp was the headquarters of an artillery division, so there were big buildings which were used for storing guns. I first wondered in which of the buildings we would sleep, but ours were but sixteen by sixteen foot tents. Two beds were placed in one tent. In May, the tents were blown away by a storm. When the wind rose, it blew away the holding stones. It became hot on one day and cold the next day. That's what the weather was like in Oklahoma. The tents, which accommodated five hundred Japanese people, were pitched in a limited portion of the camp ground, and were surrounded by double barbed wire fences. An asphalted path was built in between for temporary use. Before we arrived, the Japanese people from Hawaii were there with about eighty-five Buddhist ministers among them.<sup>22</sup>

With tents, rather than army barracks, as their new homes in the variable weather conditions of Oklahoma, Takahashi was surprised to find so many Buddhist priests in the Hawai'i group since only a handful of priests on the continental U.S. ended up in Fort Sill. For one of the internee leaders (the so-called "lieutenant commander" of the Hawai'i group), Minoru Murakami, the presence of so many religious leaders did not mean that the internees did not share a common situation, "There is no hierarchy here. Buddhist and Shinto priests live with farmers. To relieve our boredom, we play *hanafuda* and poker, and we share small talk day and night."<sup>23</sup>

What stood out more for Otokichi Ozaki, though, was the combination of the weather, the guards, and the living conditions. On May 14, 1942, he took notes on a canvas mat he found at Fort Sill that he kept with him until after the war. He scribbled:

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<sup>21</sup> See Duncan Ryuken Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 92; Seytsū Takahashi, *Amerika kaikyō: Shōwa no mikkyō tōzen* (Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan, 1990), 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Takahashi (Reverend Seytsu), Oral History 1616, Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Otokichi Ozaki in Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 72.

The spiteful guards glaring at us as though they would shoot us at any minute; the barbed wire surrounding us, one enclosure after the next; the soldiers watching us from every angle; machine guns positioned at each corner on the high towers and manned by soldiers twenty-four hours a day. ... Here at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where glittering heat waves rise and peak as far as the eyes can see. ... No soap rations. No toothpaste. ... What money we had was taken from us, so we have none. Inside the barbed wire fence, there is nothing we can buy anyway. We become irritable. Eat. Sleep. Wake up. Eat. Sleep. Wake up. A life cut off from everything in the world. ... The crazy weather and the tent life – one cannot but help but begin to lose one’s mind. ... Everyone’s eyes are beginning to look like those of dead fish.<sup>24</sup>

The separation from their families certainly took a toll on the entirely male internee population. A medical doctor and a rare Christian amongst the Fort Sill internees, Dr. Keizaburō Koyama, was able to send out and receive letters in English in correspondence with his wife and children, who had been forcible removed from their home after the civilian exclusion orders had been announced in Portland, Oregon. In a letter sent from his wife, Teru Koyama, on May 15, 1942 from the Portland Assembly Center, she reminds her husband, “Please remember you have family so keep up your courage and have faith in God and obey the orders of the U.S. government! Love, Teru”.<sup>25</sup>

The stresses of Fort Sill were compounded by the knowledge – at least for the group of 346 Japanese who had been residing on the West Coast – that their wives and children were facing imminent removal from their homes to places euphemistically named Assembly Center or temporary facilities for the West Coast Japanese American community while the larger and more permanent War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps were hastily constructed. For example, in his Fort Sill-period diary entry from May 3, 1942, Gihachi Yamashita from Los Angeles – a businessman and member of the Koyasan Buddhist Temple who had left behind his wife Tsugio and two daughters Lillian and Angela – writes, “Received telegram from family saying they are

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<sup>24</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> “Postcard to Dr. Keizaburo ‘Kei’ Koyama from Teru Koyama,” Densho Digital Archives, <http://ddr.densho.org/ddr-one-5-13/>

moving to Santa Anita [Assembly Center]. The day has finally arrived. My wife and children will now also be subjected to this hardship. They will have to say farewell to the house on San Julia we have long grown accustomed to.”<sup>26</sup> Yamashita had previously written a letter to his wife warning her to prepare for such an eventuality by buying “more trunks and big boxes and keep them [in the] Daishi church or [some]place like that.”<sup>27</sup> But when time came with the news that the family was moving to the horse racing track at Santa Anita with him unable to help, it seems to have had a big impact. Before he left Fort Sill, he would write another letter on May 4, 1942 informing his wife that internees were questioned by the authorities about whether they intended to be repatriated to Japan and that he “signed it No”; indicating his aspiration to stay in the United States in the future and rebuild a life after reuniting with his family.<sup>28</sup>

Other prominent Japanese leaders at Fort Sill included Suyeichi Okamura, who had founded Benkyōdō (a successful Japanese confectionary business in San Francisco since 1906), Toyosaku Komai (the publisher of the Los Angeles Japanese American newspaper, the *Rafu Shimpō*), and Masao Yasui (the father of the well-known Japanese American attorney Min Yasui), who had all been transferred to the Oklahoma camp after the enemy alien hearing board in Fort Missoula determined that they would be interned indefinitely.<sup>29</sup>

There appears to have been some differences in approach between the Hawai‘i group, the continental U.S. group, and the Japanese Panamanians regarding how they should conduct

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<sup>26</sup> The Gihachi Yamashita diaries (in Japanese and partially translated into English), his wartime correspondence with his wife and children, photos, and other materials have been beautifully compiled by the Japanese American National Museum into a multi-media website project called “Enemy Mail: An American Story of Wartime Separation.” See <https://enemy-mail.janm.org>

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Gihachi Yamashita to wife Tsugio (March 27, 1942). See <https://enemy-mail.janm.org>

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Gihachi Yamashita to wife Tsugio (May 4, 1942). See <https://enemy-mail.janm.org>

<sup>29</sup> See “Letters from Camp” *Discover Nikkei* (May 26, 2011)

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/nikkeialbum/albums/458>; Chris Komai, “Revival: The Rafu Shimpō,” *Discover Nikkei* (March 7, 2014) <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2014/3/7/revival-rafu-shimpo/>; and Carol Van Valkenburg, “Axis Nation ‘Detainees’ and in the West during Japanese Enemy Aliens World War II,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 61/1 (Spring 2011), 35.

themselves vis-à-vis their incarceration at Fort Sill. For example, soon after the arrival of the three groups, the group from Panama invited the other two groups to join with them to celebrate the Japanese Emperor's birthday (Tenchōsetsu) on April 29, 1942 as a form of protest of their conditions. Only the Hawai'i group agreed to join the Japanese Panamanians in a march towards the center of the internment camp, where they bowed in the direction of Japan (and the Emperor) shouting "banzai." One of the Japanese leaders from Panama, Yoshitarō Amano, recalled the scene:

We had all been trained in elementary school to accept orders and marched along, no practice required. All the soldiers wondered what was going on. The tower guard turned the machine gun towards us. I was at the end of the line and I worried. I regretted our decision already but the others continued to march along. The groups stopped at Road #3. Everyone turned towards the emperor. Suddenly, I could picture green pines, the Nijubashi Bridge to the Emperor's palace and a solemn scene unfolded in my imagination. We bowed deeply, like rice plants just before harvest. Just then, the soldiers broke into applause. We felt safer then, overjoyed, and sang the Japanese anthem. We shouted 'banzai!' three times.

It would be a month later at the very end of May that the entire population of 700 would be transferred to their next camp (Camp Livingston in Louisiana).<sup>30</sup> Amano would reflect later that the contrast between the two camps were profound – unlike Fort Sill's leaky tents and camp watchtowers equipped with machine guns, Camp Livingston for him was "almost pleasant,"<sup>31</sup> suggesting that the Fort Sill experience was likely to have been one of the more difficult camps for the Japanese internees, many of whom would go on to be transferred to 3-5 more internment camps during the war.

Upon his transfer to Camp Livingston, Rev. Seytsū Takahashi wrote a letter reflecting on his incarceration experience thus far at the Los Angeles County Jail, Fort Missoula, Fort Sill, and

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<sup>30</sup> A small contingent of the Hawai'i group had transferred out of Fort Sill right around the time when the Panamanian and continental U.S. groups arrived in Oklahoma. See Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Esther Newman, "Yoshitaro Amano, Canal Zone Resident and Prisoner #203 – Part 6," Discover Nikkei (August 11, 2010). <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2010/8/11/yoshitaro-amano/>

Fort Livingston: “I began to think that a protracted life in confinement is a period of heaven-and-Buddha-sent ascetic discipline, and I have returned to a religious exaltation and serene life. These days, I sit in meditation under the tree in starlight or moonlight nights, making myself believe that the floodlight of the watch tower is the sacred light.”<sup>32</sup>

#### **IV. Deaths of Japanese Internees at Fort Sill**

There are at least three reported deaths of Japanese at Fort Sill during the brief period of incarceration at Fort Sill. Rev. Seytsū Takahashi noted, “The eighty-five ministers performed a funeral service [at] once for three persons. One had suffered from tongue cancer, and the other two from Hawaii and Los Angeles had had neurasthenia. The funeral service was performed individually for each on the asphalted path.”<sup>33</sup>

It is not entirely clear whom Takahashi is referring to regarding the person who died in camp due to a medical condition. One possibility is that he is talking about Shiro Y. Nakahata (part-time newspaperman and member of Japanese Community Association of San Francisco). He had slipped on the ice at Fort Missoula and was admitted to that camp’s hospital. Over the objections of four Japanese physicians in the incarcerated group, who urged further tests and hospitalization, the white doctor at the hospital Dr. Smiley refused to consider any treatment and

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<sup>32</sup> The letter to a Nisei Buddhist priest, Rev. Ryōshō Sogabe (who ended up in the WRA Poston camp in Arizona) is included in Kōno Kawashima, ed. *Kōyasan beikoku betsuin gojushūnenshi* (Kōyasan Beikoku Betsuin, 1962). An extended post-war reflection is provided by Rev. Takahashi in his *Amerika kaikyō: Shōwa no mikkyō tōzen*, Ibid., 201.

<sup>33</sup> Takahashi (Reverend Seytsu), Oral History 1616, Ibid. Otokichi Ozaki noted that the funeral on May 13, 1942 were for two men: Kanesaburō Ōshima and Mr. Ochi (or Ouchi) of Panama, who had died on May 1, 1942. See Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 70. Here, I will trust the Buddhist priest’s account of three deaths being memorialized at the funeral since he would have been more involved in the preparations of the ceremony than the layperson Ozaki.

Nakahata was sent forward along with 345 others to Fort Sill. It is unclear from what medical condition he died, but the family back in California was informed of his sudden death in Oklahoma and that they had until 8 a.m. the following morning to inform authorities about the “disposition of his remains, or they would simply bury him in the cemetery there.”<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, the family was able to arrange for his body to be sent home to California after the Buddhist funeral that Takahashi co-officiated. The other possibility is that he is referring to a Mr. Ouchi from Panama, who became the symbol of maltreatment of Japanese under U.S. custody. According to historian Greg Robinson’s study of the Japanese Panamanian internment, in a 1944 letter from the Japanese government to the Swiss legation responding to the U.S. government’s lodging of a formal protest against Japan’s treatment of American POWs, it states: “One Ouchi was gravely ill when he was handed over to the American Authorities in Panama, but the Authorities gave him neither medical treatment, nor liquid nourishment which was all he could take. His wife requested that he be taken into Panama hospital but the request was not heeded, and he was sent on to Fort Sill in April 1942 together with other Japanese internees. As no nurse was provided at the new camp, his fellow internees looked after him, but no medical treatment having been given, he finally died on May 1st.”<sup>35</sup>

Takahashi’s reference to neurasthenia – a medical condition characterized by fatigue, irritability, and depression – points to the individual who he had previously helped on the initial train ride to Fort Missoula. According to the Buddhist priest’s account, it appears that guards may have killed him due to some behavior that was deemed disruptive. Takahashi recalled:

The guy who tried to cut his tongue through on the train and attempted to commit suicide by poking his head into a stove in Montana was there in Fort Sill. He clamored at night, so they

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<sup>34</sup> Carol Van Valkenburg, “Axis Nation 'Detainees' and in the West during Japanese Enemy Aliens World War II,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 61/1 (Spring 2011), 31.

<sup>35</sup> See Greg Robinson and Maxine Minne, *Ibid.* Otokichi Ozaki also notes the death of the Japanese Panamanian, but refers to him as “Mr. Ochi of Panama”. See Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 70.

killed him. On the day he was killed, they thought the Japanese would go on a riot and they turned on a searchlight to keep strict vigilance on the internees. We couldn't go to the bathroom because of the searchlight. We could piddle somewhere behind the trees but we were in trouble if we wanted to evacuate the bowels.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the most well-known of the deaths at Fort Sill is that of 59-year old Kanesaburō Ōshima because of the circumstances of his demise – namely, by being shot in the back of the head by one of the guards on May 12, 1942 as he was climbing the fence at Fort Sill. The father of 11 children, who had run small businesses in Kona, Hawai‘i such as a barbershop, a taxi business, and a snack shop.<sup>37</sup> Various accounts exist, with some discrepancies, but the eye-witness accounts include that of:

1] Minoru Murakami (Hawai‘i ship 2) – Murakami was the so-called “lieutenant commander” of the Hawai‘i group (picked by the internees to be the second-in-command to represent the group to the U.S. authorities). His version is cited by Tetsuden Kashima in his *Densho Encyclopedia* article “Homicide in Camp”.<sup>38</sup> One English translation of the recollection is: “Fellow internees at the scene tried to pull him down. But he climbed so fast and they could not catch him. He jumped down on the other side of [the] inner fence that was about ten feet high. A guard on duty standing nearby ordered him to stop, but he started running away southward. The guard chased him with a pistol in his hand. Watching the guard chasing him, fellow internees ran together with the guard along the fence shouting, 'Don't shoot! He is insane.' The guard seemed to be slightly hesitant, but he tried to shoot Mr. Oshima two or three times. Bullets did not hit him. Mr. Oshima, horrified by the sound of pistol, ran toward the foot of the guard-post tower where machine guns were positioned. He started to climb the barbed wire and reached the top of the fence, then he stopped there. At that moment, a guard who came running shot Mr. Oshima from the back. One bullet went through his head and he fell down on his back. Mr. Oshima died on the spot.”<sup>39</sup>

2] Rev. Hōyu Ōta (Hawai‘i ship 2) – in his unpublished memoir (collated in 1978 by the Jōdoshū headquarters in Tokyo), the Jōdo sect Buddhist priest who had been serving the Laupahoehoe Jodo Mission on the Big Island, noted how Ōshima had mentally broken down before his attempt to climb the fence.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Takahashi (Reverend Seytsu), Oral History 1616, Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Tom Ikeda's interview with Susumu Ōshima (June 9, 2010); <http://ddr.densho.org/media/ddr-densho-1000/ddr-densho-1000-283-transcript-83a44f14d9.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Tetsuden Kashima “Homicide in Camp,” [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Homicide\\_in\\_camp/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Homicide_in_camp/)

<sup>39</sup> This was originally told to Otokichi Ozaki as part of a radio segment. Densho's Brian Niiya provided the transcript in the Japanese Culture Center of Hawai'i collection (Box 4, Folder 13, Item A) to Kashima for the article. A slightly different English translation is given in Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 68-69.

<sup>40</sup> Unpublished Hōyu Ōta Memoir manuscript; Jōdoshū Kokusaibu Archives, collated in 1978 by the Jōdo Buddhist headquarters in Tokyo.

3] Rev. Seytsū Takahashi (transfer from Fort Missoula) – in an oral history, the Shingon Buddhist priest who had served Los Angeles’ Koyasan Buddhist Temple before the FBI roundup, noted: “As far as I remember, it happened at around eight o'clock in the morning. A man from Hawaii tried to climb up the barbed wire. You couldn't climb up it even if you wanted to try. Then a watchman tried to shoot at him. We said to him not to shoot him because he couldn't climb up anyway. Machine guns were placed at the four corners inside of the camp but a watchman who was standing in the outside of the camp shot him to death.”<sup>41</sup>

4] Rev. Hōzui Nakayama (Hawai'i ship 2) – the recollections about the incident of this Sōtō Zen Buddhist priest (who had served Kona's Daifukuji Temple) to the family of Kanesaburō Ōshima is partly the basis of Ōshima's son, Susumu Ōshima's own recounting provided to interviewer Tom Ikeda of Densho.<sup>42</sup> Susumu's understanding of what happened on the morning of May 12, 1942 was that his father: “was playing *Hanafuda*, he didn't have fun, he walked away, and he wanted to cut some wood with an axe, he asked for axe and no one would let him. And after walking around, then he snapped, and started to run for the barbed wire trying to escape. And the other internees said, ‘Don't shoot,’ to the guard, because you know those sentries, being in the service against the Japanese, they would be glad to shoot that guy. So that's what happened. ‘Don't shoot, don't shoot.’ He cannot get far, but he just pulled the trigger, and then he went down and died right there.”

With Ōshima's death, the morale of the interned Japanese was severely deflated, especially when the Army soldiers went out of their way to bring in a machine gun to the funeral “in case of a riot.”<sup>43</sup>

When the Buddhist funeral was held on May 13, 1942, fellow Fort Sill internee Otokichi Ozaki recalled the feelings of the roughly 700 Japanese who attended: “A sense of moral indignation welled up in our hearts. Nothing is more transient than human life. . . . Smoke from the burning incense stung our eyes. . . . the pitiful death of a fellow countryman whose life was shattered when his blood stained the distant desert sands of the Oklahoma plain as the glowing evening sun sank beyond the horizon.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Takahashi (Reverend Seytsu), Oral History 1616, Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Tom Ikeda's interview of Susumu Ōshima, Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Honda, ed. *Family Torn Apart*, 70-71.