



On left is the location of the Poston Internment Camp, a concentration camp in Arizona.

On right is a painting of the Poston Internment Camp painted by Japanese American Tom Tanaka while interned.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, forcing the relocation of over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry — two-thirds of whom were American citizens — from their home, including Tai Doris Shigaki.



Tai Doris Shigaki was born June 10, 1921, in Orange, California, daughter of Zenpoi Shigaki and Tofu Yoshimur (1886-1960) who were born in Japan. When she was six years old, her father died at their southern California home. Her mother was a dressmaker who worked in the home. Her mother remarried, and the stepfather, a deep-sea fisherman, was often away, fishing in Mexican waters. Her parents, mild Buddhists, didn't mind when Tai joined the local Gardena Japanese Baptist Church.

"As Japanese military action escalated in 1940, rumors circulated that Japanese Americans would not be permitted to live on the coasts. Shigaki's parents moved to Utah to avoid conflict, and she transferred to the University of Redlands thinking that was far enough from the coast to be a safe haven. But when 360 Japanese bomber and torpedo planes devastated Pearl Harbor in the early morning of December 7, 1941, Shigaki had a feeling that life for Japanese Americans would change forever," in the article, "Matters of Circumstance" by Jonathan E. Bridge.

Tai, along with 110 thousand people of Japanese ancestry — two-thirds American citizens, were forced to relocate to military internment camps. "That spring, Shigaki was instructed to report to the train station. The news left her numb, but she and all the others who were notified dutifully followed orders. Shigaki packed what few possessions she had and boarded the train for a location unknown to her at the time."

Tai ended up at Poston Internment Camp, located in Yuma County (now in La Paz County) in southwestern Arizona. It was the largest of the ten American concentration camps operated by the War Relocation Authority during World War II. The concentration camps were in the desert, three miles west of the Colorado River.

Poston was built on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, over objections of the tribal council, who refused use of their land because they did not want to be involved in inflicting the same injustice they had faced on the Japanese internees. Army commanders and Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, though, overruled the council, took control of 71 thousand acres of tribal land, and began construction in early 1942.

Upon completion, the Poston site consisted of hundreds of residential barracks, a hospital, an administrative center, and guard and staff housing. The camp officially opened as the Colorado River Relocation Center on June 1, 1942.

Hurried construction and lack of supplies made living conditions for internees barely suitable. Weather also added to the difficulties of living in the camp because of its location in the desert. Extreme heat during the summer, reaching up to 115°F, and extreme cold in the winter, reaching as low as 35°F, added to the internees' frustrations.

Like many *nisei* – the term for second-generation Japanese Americans – Tai thought it was impolite to publicly discuss unpleasant things about herself. But later she wrote about this in the book *Reflections*, a collection of first-person accounts of camp life. "We suffered the straw mattress, the lack of privacy in the common showers room, bedroom, toilet facility, and the poor food in the mess hall with the knowledge that this was very temporary. As the days went into weeks and months, the lark was no longer very amusing. And each day we watched hundreds of new evacuees coming and heard the tragic stories of how they were uprooted, having to leave behind most of their possessions."

She received a scholarship from Denison University to leave the camp. And Tai spent the rest of her life defending the dignity of others. She later graduated from Andover Newton Theological Seminary. After serving churches in Hawaii and Minnesota, she became the local YWCA director, while she

got yet another degree, this time in social work.

The University of Minnesota master's degree in social work included working with prison inmates. Tai faced her ultimate test: affecting those who had reached a low point in their life and in their sense of place. She became assistant director of staff trading for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, and for 25 years served in top administration, including the superintendent of the Minnesota's Women's Reformatory.

In a 1954 article, "Escapee Free for Less Than Hour," an inmate from the State Reformatory for Women in Shakopee escaped by wiggling out of the basement window. Quanita Schleischer was twenty years old. She was an inmate, and part of her job was to clean the buildings. Quanita had gone to the basement for cleaning supplies. It was 8 a.m., and Quanita noted that the basement window was easy to open. So, she escaped through the window. When the prison workers noted this, they alerted Scott County authorities at 8:02 a.m. Tai, the assistant superintendent, was driving on Highway 169 and the Highway 5 intersection when she saw Quanita. And so, Tai took Quanita back to prison. At the reformatory, the guards informed the Scott County authorities about the apprehension.

Quanita was back in prison after just ten minutes of freedom!

In retirement, Tai served on the American Baptist Churches, USA General Board, served as chair of the Asian American Baptist Caucus, and was a founding board member of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America –







Bautistas por la Paz. She travelled the world spreading wisdom, solidarity, and peace. When she couldn't travel, she quietly funded others' expenses.

When she was 86 years old, Tai married Spencer Parsons and lived in Massachusetts until his death a few years later. She then returned to Minnesota before moving to Chicago to be closer to her extended family.

Tai Doris Shigaki Parsons, at age 102, died in Evanston, Illinois May 30, 2024.

A celebration was held at the University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, a liberal church connected to the Alliance of Baptists, Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, and Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Tai was cremated in Schiller Park, Illinois.

Bibliography

Bridge, Jonathan E. "Matters of Circumstance" *Denison Magazine*, Issue 2: Summer 2006.

"Escapee Free for Less Than Hour." *Shakopee Valley News*, 7 May 1954

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Tai Doris Shigaki

1921-2024

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