

Thousand Oaks man's visit to Colorado brings back internment camp memories

By Robyn Flans

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Thousand Oaks resident William Tomatsu Sueoka's recent trip with his son to an excavation site at Camp Amache in Granada, Colo., was personal.

As a Japanese-American 4-year-old, Sueoka lived with his parents in Northern California until they were ordered to Camp Amache, the internment camp in Granada. He recalled his experiences there, such as playing with other children, as pleasurable, but said his parents later rarely spoke of that period from 1942-45.

As a retired pathologist, Sueoka, 74, took archaeology classes at Moorpark College and enjoyed going on digs at Chumash sites. When he had heard that work by Denver University's Bonnie Clark was focusing on life at Camp Amache, he contacted her.

"She wanted to know how the Japanese Americans coped with the big change," Sueoka said. "What did they do to normalize their lives that were disrupted by the relatively sudden evacuation notice in World War II? So she focused on things like: What did they do? What was their leisure activity? What kept them busy, including but not exclusive to gardening and landscape? Many of the Japanese Americans were into agriculture and gardening and landscape work, so they brought those skills to the Amache Camp."

When Sueoka was planning a trip to Denver, Clark invited him to join the Amache dig. Because he could share memories of being interned, he was of special interest to the student program when he and his son joined the four-week excavation in its last week.

"When I saw the marbles, it reminded of playing marbles, and I showed them how we did it," Sueoka said. "When professor Clark showed me a crushed can, I instantly remembered it as a Log Cabin syrup can. They used to sell syrup in tin containers in the form of a log cabin."

Most of the exploration was surface, and the digging was fairly shallow because the camp was only about 70 years old, Sueoka said.

"They found mostly broken ceramics and glass artifacts," he said. "They also found rusted tin cans, some with holes in the bottom with handles, so it was surmised that those were probably pots for plants. A lot of it was Army and military issue. Some were decorative that people brought with them. Those were thought to be very important items to them because the amount of things people could bring into the camp was very

limited. It was only what you could carry."

For Sueoka's 27-year-old son, Michael, the trip was invaluable.

"I was able to learn more about my culture and family history," he said. "I really didn't know that any of this had happened to my father or my family until high school, when they said to do a report on someone in my family. He had never mentioned it until I had to force it out of him. At the dig I would see him standing there thinking. I would imagine what he was doing as a kid."

His father said with a laugh, "I introduced a new slant to the phrase 'digging into my family past.' "



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