

Mori Sakai

By Oliver Churchill, Aaron Courtney, and Theo Schill

Mori Sakai was born in 1935 on Vashon Island's Glen Acres to Ensaku and Miyaka Sakai <sup>2</sup>. The youngest of five children, after Teruko "Tillie", Metcko "Mets", Masato "Freddie", Sumiko "Sumi", and Masakatsu "Harry", Mori's early life was bucolic, his days spent with his siblings on the family's strawberry and vegetable farm. Despite his juvenility, he managed to forge deep connections with friends on the Island. Mori's idyllic island life came to an abrupt and untimely end on May 16th, 1942, when he was just 7 years old. His and over 100 other Vashon families were rounded up in Ober Park and packed into trucks that would remove them from their homes and lives and take them to what awaited them <sup>2</sup>

Mori and his family's first stop was the Pinedale Assembly Center, near Fresno, California. Pinedale's population was mainly comprised of Japanese-Americans from Washington state who, like Mori and the entire Sakai family, were uprooted from their lives for reasons far beyond their control <sup>3</sup>. With a population of roughly 4800, the center, unlike others similar to it, had very limited educational programs and medical facilities <sup>3</sup>. The hot climate of California in the summer was a far cry from the much cooler weather of the Pacific Northwest, which the vast majority of the residents were used to, presenting significant additional challenges. Faced with these challenges and others, the United States Government decided to move most of the California residents to Poston, while the Pacific Northwesterners were redirected to Tule Lake.

The Tule Lake Internment Camp was located in northeastern California. The conditions there were inhumane to say the least. With a population of 18,700 cramped into quarters built for a maximum of 15,000, how could it not be? The largest of any of the camps constructed over the course of Japanese internment, the conditions were so deplorable, that several times the residents attempted to strike; first over the lack of delivery on promised goods and salaries, then over treatment of workers in the mess halls. The leadership within the camps, however, viewed these acts not as an assertion of human dignity and civil rights, but as threatening acts of disloyalty <sup>4</sup>.

Tule Lake is probably most famous for its mishandling of the now infamous loyalty questionnaire. Lack of clarity on the questions and inadequate deadlines to complete it led to widespread dissent <sup>4</sup>. Those who refused to answer or said no were unreservedly disloyal. You were also disloyal if you answered yes but added clarifiers such as "when my rights are restored" or "when my family is released" <sup>1</sup>. Of the 10,843 responses to the question regarding military service, 30% refused to give absolute yeses. In the question disavowing loyalty to Japan, 15.6% were marked as disloyal because they refused to give definite yeses <sup>4</sup>. Those who were labeled as loyal were moved to other camps, and Tule Lake remained the home of those thought to be disloyal .

Mori Sakai and his family remained at Tule Lake for the entirety of the remainder of their internment, suggesting that they failed to give unreserved yeses to the loyalty questionnaire for some reason or another. Whatever the reason, the entirety of the Sakai family lingered, with family members filling their days working; as wait staff and mail sorters <sup>4</sup>. Of their experience during this period, Mori's sister Sumi said that she "felt like the country let [her] down". The

children had to watch their parents, once produce farmers with a comfortable life and happy family, “los[e] their pride”. They didn’t know it at the time, but their beloved farm was, soon after they were herded off the Island, destroyed <sup>6</sup>.

Mori and his family were released from Tule Lake on January 30, 1946 <sup>2</sup>. They were relocated to Oakland, California to work, and they worked there for five years. Harry, Mori’s eldest brother, encouraged the entirety of the Sakai family to come and work where he was currently employed, farming strawberries on the Driscoll Ranch. They took his advice, working at the ranch, which was just an hour outside of Oakland. There they lived together, saving money, until they had enough to purchase a ranch of their own, called Kraft Ranch. Here, they continued cultivating the familial gift for farming, harvesting strawberries and prunes.<sup>1</sup>

Mori remained in California, eventually moving to Sacramento, where he still lives to this day.



1: Morgan Hill Times Staff and By: "Persistence Pays Off," Morgan Hill Times | Morgan Hill, San Martin, CA, December 20, 2019, <https://morganhilltimes.com/persistence-pays-off/>.

2: N.A.P Staff - et al., "A Bittersweet Return to Vashon," The North American Post, March 18, 2021, <https://napost.com/2021/a-bittersweet-return-to-vashon/>.

3: "Pinedale (Detention Facility)," Pinedale (detention facility) | Densho Encyclopedia, accessed February 9, 2022, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Pinedale\\_\(detention\\_facility\)/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Pinedale_(detention_facility)/).

4: "Tule Lake (Detention Facility)," Tule Lake (detention facility) | Densho Encyclopedia, accessed February 9, 2022, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Tule\\_Lake/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Tule_Lake/)

5: Staff, By: Gilroy Dispatch. "Tragic Death on - Gilroy Dispatch: Gilroy, San Martin, CA." Gilroy Dispatch | Gilroy, San Martin, CA, September 24, 2005. <https://gilroydispatch.com/tragic-death-on/>.

6: Morgan Hill Times Staff and By: "Persistence Pays Off," Morgan Hill Times | Morgan Hill, San Martin, CA, December 20, 2019, <https://morganhilltimes.com/persistence-pays-off/>.

1 <https://morganhilltimes.com/persistence-pays-off/>

2 <https://gilroydispatch.com/tragic-death-on/>