

Sam Sakamoto

By Marina-Rae Gill and Andrew Martinak

Sam (Osama) Sakamoto was born on February 13th, 1925¹ on Vashon Island. He lived with his mom, Katsuye (Katsu), his dad, Jack (Jazu), and his younger sister, Michico⁶. His family lived in Burton and had a berry farm². Sam went to school on Vashon and would have graduated with the class of 1943. He remembered disliking his English class and playing with his friend Jack Rose⁵.

On May 16, 1942, Sam and his family gathered at Ober Park alongside many other local Japanese American families on the island. There they boarded trucks and were transported off of Vashon leaving their homes behind them². The Sakamotos were taken to a temporary assembly center in Pinedale, California, where they resided for several months. Sam and his family were later transferred to the Tule Lake Internment Camp in California⁴. In a recent interview Sam recalled that the conditions in which interned Japanese Americans lived were unjust. He remembered that even the climate had an effect on relocated people, as they would often pass out from the heat. While at Tule lake Sam worked on farms surrounding the camp with a group of boys. His father Jack (Jazu) worked as a boiler man and a matchmaker. Young people would often approach him looking for a match. Alongside other children at Tule lake, Sam continued his schooling, including studying English which Sam “hated with a passion.”⁴ Sam was interned at Tule lake for about a year before his family was granted permission to move to Brigham, Utah.¹ Tule Lake was transformed into a segregation center after the loyalty questionnaire. Most of its inmates were deemed as disloyal for refusing to answer certain questions on the questionnaire. As a result, Tule lake increased its security, building additional watch towers (totaling 28) and a fence with barbed wire on the perimeter of the camp. On top of that, 1,000 military police were sent to Tule Lake to act as security guards.³

After they were released from the internment camp, Sam's parents moved to Brigham, Utah where he graduated from Jordan High School before joining the military. He majored in English. Soon after Sam began a correspondence with a woman named Yae, and it was nearly four years until they met in person to eventually marry. Sam did his military training in Camp Blanding, Florida for a few years before going to Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Eventually, Sam was drafted and he traveled to Naples, Italy, where he started studying German weapons. After being discharged, Sam moved back to Fort Snelling and worked as a translator. After Sam's retirement from the military, he and his wife Yae moved to California to work on a strawberry farm with his parents. Sam served 18 years at the soil conservation program at Santa Cruz and then was elected to the Federal Soil Conservation. He also became very involved with the Buddhist church. Sam has two sons, both of them Vietnam veterans. He also has a daughter and a few grandchildren, but none of them live on Vashon. Sam and Yae still live in Soquel, California where he is now 97 years old.⁴

1. National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; *WWII Draft Registration Cards for Washington, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 155
2. Friends of Mukai. “MAY 16 Commemorates Japanese American day of Exile at Mukai on Vashon.” NVC and NVC Foundation, April 2021. <https://www.nvcfoundation.org/>.

3. Takel, Barbara. "Table of Contents - A-Z." Densho Encyclopedia, October 16, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/contents/>.
4. "Japanese Presence Project." Vashon Maury Island Heritage Museum, n.d. Accessed February 7, 2022.
5. Haulman, Bruce. "Voice of Vashon ." Vashon: Then & Now – The Japanese American Presence on Vashon – Part 1, October 31, 2018. <http://www.vov.com/>.
6. "The Japanese Presence Project." Japanese Presence Project, December 29, 2019. https://www.vashonhistory.com/japanese_presence_main_2.html#.