

Sumi Sakai

By Oliver Churchill, Aaron Courtney, and Theo Schill

Sumi Sakai was born on March 29, 1928 on Vashon Island's Glen Acres to Ensaku and Miyaka Sakai ². The second-youngest of five children, Sumi's early life was bucolic, her days spent with her siblings on the family's strawberry and vegetable farm. She recalls that her family was, "... so happy". Despite her juvenility, she managed to forge deep connections with friends on the Island; friends who would ultimately keep in touch with Sumi, even when her idyllic island life came to an abrupt and untimely end on May 16th, 1942, when hers 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 ²



Sumi and her 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 Sumi and the entire Sakai family, were uprooted from their lives for reasons far beyond their control ³. With a population of roughly 4800, the center, unlike others similar to it, had very limited educational programs and medical facilities ³. 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 be⁴? 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 ⁴.

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 ⁴. 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" ¹. 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 ⁴. Those who were labeled as loyal were moved to other camps, and Tule Lake remained the home of those thought to be disloyal .

Sumi Sakai and her 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 Sumi filling her days working as a waitress in the mess halls that were habitually rallying about unfair conditions. She was also a mail sorter in the post office for a time ⁴. Of her experience during this period, Sumi said that she "felt like the country let [her] down". She had to watch her 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.



Sumi and her family were released from Tule Lake on January 30, 1946 ². She was relocated to Oakland, California to work, cleaning houses as a maid. She worked in Oakland for five years, along the way meeting a young man named Tom Kusayanagi, who would eventually become her husband. Harry, Sumi'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.¹



Sumi and her husband worked hard, scrimping and saving, finally earning enough to purchase a home of their own, eventually settling down in Morgan Hill, California. Here, Sumi put herself through beauty school and opened a beauty shop out of her garage. It was a hectic life, though, as at the same time she was busy caring for her newborn son, continuing with more

ranch work, and cleaning houses. In 1988, after her extensive career, Sumi finally decided to begin a well-deserved retirement. Two days before she could, however, disaster struck. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, walking down a street, when she was caught in the middle of a freak car accident, breaking both of her legs entirely. Though multiple doctors advised her to amputate her now useless legs, Sumi refused to accept her diagnosis, remaining strong.

And strength she would need. Sumi and her husband had one child, a son named Gordon. According to an article about him, Gordon didn't care much about money or status. He cared more about providing for his family, jamming with his rock band, and giving back to his community.⁵ Tragically,



Gordon was killed in a freak accident in Las Vegas in 2005, when a driver intentionally drove onto a sidewalk, killing Gordon and two others and injuring many others ⁵. After their son's death, Sumi and her husband founded the Gordon Rocks Music Scholarship Foundation that annually raises scholarship funds for local high school students.¹



Sumi's caring demeanor comes through at the Morgan Hill Senior Center, where she now spends most of her time helping others and participating in activities. Now 95, Sumi takes great pride in her posterity: her grandson Scott, adopted granddaughter, and four great-grandsons ¹.

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/

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/>.