Esther Takei Nishio Papers

Finding aid created by Jamie Henricks.
Japanese American National Museum
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Finding aid for the Esther Takei Nishio Papers


Descriptive Summary

Title: Esther Takei Nishio papers

Dates (inclusive): 1941-1981

Date (bulk): 1944


Collection Size: .2 linear feet (1 box)

Repository: Japanese American National Museum (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Los Angeles, California 90012

Creator: Nishio, Esther Takei

Abstract: This collection contains documents and objects collected by Esther Takei Nishio related to her experience returning to Pasadena to enroll in college before the exclusion order was lifted from the west coast. Items are primarily letters and articles, but also include a photo and identification badge. Items date from 1941 to 1981 but are primarily from 1944.


Access

By appointment only. Please contact the Collections Management and Access Unit (collections@janm.org). Advanced notice is required.

Publication Rights

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Preferred Citation


Acquisition Information

The collection was acquired in 1999 as a gift of Esther Nishio, in memory of Hugh H. Anderson, William C. Carr, and Esther’s parents Harry Shigehisa and Ninoe Takei.

Processing Information

A finding aid was created in 2017 by Jamie Henricks.

Biographical Note

Biographical information is primarily condensed from Esther’s page on the Densho Encyclopedia (http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Esther%20Takei%20Nishio/) as well as information from collection contents:

Esther Kazue Takei was born on February 25, 1925 to Issei parents Harry Shigehisa and Ninoe Takei, both immigrants from Yamanashi prefecture. She grew up in Venice, California, where her parents had a business running carnival games and a ride at the Venice Pier. She attended Florence Nightingale Elementary and Venice Jr. and Senior High Schools, while working in game booths on the weekends.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, her father was arrested and interned in New Mexico, and Esther and her mother moved with a cousin to El Sereno. In preparation for their forced removal, they left the carnival and ride equipment with an employee. Hugh Anderson, a young accountant whom they had met through another employee, stored furniture and personal belongings for them. A high school senior, she was also forced to quit school a few weeks shy of graduating.

Esther and her mother were sent first to the Santa Anita Assembly Center. She worked as waitress in the yellow mess hall. While at Santa Anita, her father rejoined them, just prior to their moving on the Amache, Colorado concentration camp. At Amache, she worked as a dental assistant for a friend of parents'; her father served as a block manager and her mother worked in the mess hall. They lived in the same block with noted artist Tokio Ueyama, who taught painting classes that her mother took.

In 1943, she left camp for Boulder, Colorado, with the intention of enrolling at the University of Colorado, where another former employee now taught. She worked as a domestic servant for a wealthy local family while trying to establish
residency, but was unhappy with the work. Her father eventually came to escort her back to Amache. Back at Amache, she worked for the camp newspaper, the Granada Pioneer, as a reporter and columnist and drew a comic titled “Ama-chan.” She and a friend also served as advisors for a young teenage girls' club.

In the summer of 1944, she was approached by Hugh Anderson and William Carr of the Friends of the American Way. Upset by the forced removal of Japanese Americans, Anderson had stored the belongings of multiple families and supervised the rental of their homes. He took his family to Poston Relocation Center (in Arizona) where he worked as an adviser to the accounting department for several months before eventually contracting polio and returning to Pasadena. Anderson had been in contact with new Western Defense Command head General Charles Bonesteel, who had indicated a willingness to allow a Nisei student to return to the West Coast as a test case. “My parents and I talked it over, and they agreed that it would be something good, you know something that we should try,” she remembered. “So we told Mr. Anderson that we were willing to go along with his idea.”

She arrived by train in Pasadena to attend Pasadena Junior College on September 12, 1944. She was welcomed at the train station by Anderson, the editor of the school paper, and members of the Student Christian Association. Anderson and school officials had primed the student body who proved to be uniformly supportive of the new Nisei student. While attending school, she would live with Anderson's family, which included four young children.

The intent was “for me to attend school quietly, and see how I integrated with the student body and with the community,” she recalled. “If all went well, then they would let the news leak out that a Japanese American had returned to California and that there were no problems, therefore, that all the others who had been chased out could return to their homes.” But mainstream Los Angeles newspapers picked up the story from the school paper, and it spread widely. A “Ban the Japs Committee” formed, led by a local activist named George L. Kelley, who protested to the Pasadena Board of Education. A protest march was planned and 200 people attended a “Ban the Japs” meeting on September 28 at the Pasadena Public Library including members of old-time anti-Japanese groups such as the Native Sons and Daughters of Golden West and the American Legion. Anderson’s address was published in a newspaper article, and cars began to drive by constantly to harass the family. Anderson moved his family in with out-of-town relatives, and Takei moved in with another family until things cooled down.

Barely a week after the big anti-Japanese meeting, Kelley had a change of heart, announcing that he was resigning from his own committee and applying to become a member of the Pasadena Chapter of the Committee for American Principles and Fair Play, crediting a speech by visiting War Relocation Authority head Dillon Myer with convincing him to switch sides. In the meantime, outside feedback to the college concerning Takei was overwhelmingly positive. She also received many letters from outraged servicemen, both white and Japanese American, who offered to return to “protect” her. Members of AmVets (veterans who served in the South Pacific) often escorted her to class or around town. Takei focused on her studies, and she also became a sought after speaker at other colleges in the community. In the summer of 1945, she was one of several college students sponsored by the YM/YWCA to return to camp to serve as "counselors" to high school graduates to encourage them to leave camp for college; she spent a month at Gila River in this capacity.

In the meantime, her parents left camp, joining her to live in an apartment arranged for them by Carr. Finding no trace of their former business in Venice, they were forced to start over, with her father becoming a gardener and her mother cleaning houses. Esther quit school to attend a secretarial school, eventually landing clerical positions in an import/export firm and an army surplus store. Her father later started a frozen food business with other Issei and became a naturalized U.S. citizen. Her parents eventually decided to move back to Japan to retire in 1958.

Esther was one of many young Nisei girls and women who started social/service clubs. The Pasonas included other Pasadena Junior College students and sponsored dances and other activities. She also was also sought out by a young resettler named Shigeto Nishio whom she had first met at Santa Anita. They began dating in the summer of 1946 and took it seriously. After graduating in June 1947, they had a son a year later.

Shig worked initially as a gardener, than later as a real estate broker and insurance broker. Once her son entered middle school, Esther went back to work, first as a secretary for noted industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss, then for an air freight company. She and her family remained in Pasadena throughout.

Aside from testifying before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in 1981, she remained mostly silent about her wartime experience. She agreed to an oral history interview for the REgenerations project of the Japanese American National Museum in 1999, which is available online. She received an honorary degree from Pasadena City College in 2009.

**Scope and Content**

This collection contains documents and objects collected by Esther Takei Nishio related to her experience returning to Pasadena to enroll at Pasadena Junior College (PJC, and later Pasadena City College, PCC) before the exclusion order was lifted from the west coast. Items date from 1941 to 1981 but are primarily from 1944. Items are primarily letters and

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articles, but also include a photo and identification badge. Letters are primarily in support of Esther returning to Pasadena for school, though others are notes from friends or requests from strangers for translation assistance. Articles are about Japanese Americans, internment, and redress. Multiple drafts of Esther’s testimony statement to a redress committee are included.

**Arrangement**
Previous arrangement was preserved.

**Indexing Terms**
Nishio, Esther Takei
Japanese Americans--Evacuation and relocation, 1942-1945
Pasadena Junior College (Pasadena, Calif.)
Pasadena City College (Pasadena, Calif.)

Item list for the Esther Takei Nishio papers.