

Within Makeshift Walls

Portland Expo Center's era as a prison for Japanese Americans

By Eric Gold

An Orange Line MAX light-rail train leaves the station at Portland State University. As the train continues north along the transit mall through downtown, the sign in the window of the train changes, as well as the color of the square displayed on the front.

Just like that, the Orange Line train has become a Yellow Line train. Its destination is no longer Portland City Center, but the Expo Center—across the Willamette River and along Interstate 5 through North Portland to the far northern edge of the city, nearly all the way to the Columbia River.

The train moves north through downtown Portland, crossing West Burnside Street. The next few stops are in Old Town, a National Historic Landmark district that also contains blocks Portlanders have known for decades as Chinatown.

Some of Old Town's blocks were once Portland's Japantown, though passengers on this MAX train won't see much sign of that history as they ride through. In Portland today, Japantown is no longer Japantown, except in the memories of some citizens and in the records preserved in the archives of the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, just steps from the tracks.

If you visit the Nikkei Center, you'll find a powerful permanent exhibit that begins to tell the story of how and why this part of Portland's identity changed. But first, there's another important stop. It's easy to get there.

You just have to stay on until the end of the line.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. About two months earlier, the Imperial Japanese Navy had attacked Pearl Harbor. The next day, the United States declared war against Japan.

In the order, the president authorized and directed the Secretary of War "to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he...may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War...may impose in his discretion."

In other words, the president gave his military commanders the power to draw a line around any part of the country. Within that area, the military could force you to stay or force you to leave. Within that area, the normal rights of American citizens would no longer apply.

Executive Order 9066 does not specifically mention people of Japanese or any other particular background. The order is abstract: any location, any size, any restrictions. In practice, the order signaled a large-scale, interstate program that relocated and imprisoned Japanese Americans.

On March 2, General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, issued Public Proclamation No. 1, creating Military Areas 1 and 2. Both were massive: Area 1 included the entire West Coast—Washington, Oregon, and California—from the Pacific Ocean inland to approximately the eastern side of the Cascades mountain range, as well as the southern half of Arizona. The remainder of those western states comprised Area 2.

With its new powers, the US military ordered all people of Japanese ancestry, citizens or otherwise, excluded from Military Area 1. An initial voluntary evacuation had relatively little effect. Lack of contacts outside the exclusion zone, frozen bank accounts, and hostility from inland communities contributed to west coast Japanese Americans' reluctance—and in many cases, inability—to move.

Between 1942 and 1944, no person of Japanese ancestry was ever charged with spying. Never-

theless, by the end of March, DeWitt had begun to forcibly remove about 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and businesses.

Officials of the Wartime Civil Control Administration, a branch of the Western Defense Command, ordered people to report to fifteen “assembly centers” along the West Coast.

These temporary detention centers were mostly repurposed facilities like racetracks and fairgrounds. The complexes were large enough to house thousands of people and flexible enough to change functions quickly.

Of the fifteen centers, twelve were in California. One was in Puyallup, Washington, and another in Arizona. The remaining assembly center, where 3,676 Japanese Americans from Oregon and southwest Washington were eventually held, was the Pacific International Livestock Exposition Center, now known as the Portland Expo Center.

At the Yellow Line’s last station, Expo Center, the train comes to a rest against a large backstop. The doors open.

At the edge of the platform stand two gates, each made of a pair of cedar pillars capped by a double crosspiece. Artist Valerie Otani created the installation titled *Voices of Remembrance*, as part of a public art project involving each stop of the Yellow Line.

The imagery of the gates, Otani says, evokes the *torii*, or traditional Japanese gates, found in Japan and throughout Asia, where they mark sacred spaces such as mountains, islands, and the entrances to temples. “Although this is not a sacred space,” she says, “it’s a significant one.” Passing under a *torii* gate is an act of purification, she says. “So it seemed just a wonderful way to mark this history and be able to recognize it in a way that is also healing in a certain way.”

Several ropes lined with metal tags hang from each gate, one for each person held at the detention center. The tags represent the manila baggage tags the internees had to wear, each bearing a number assigned to their family. “You meet people today and they all still know their family number,” Otani says.

The way the metal tags hang from the ropes also recalls the Japanese tradition of tying paper prayers or wishes on similar ropes at temples. “It turns out they make a sound,” Otani says of her metal versions, “which was kind of a fortuitous accident. Sometimes it’s totally silent and still, and other times very jangling and insistent.”

Leaving the train, passengers follow the sidewalk, passing through the gate, and trudge past rows and rows of parking spaces on the way to the halls of the Portland Expo Center itself. These monumental buildings look low from this distance, a series of façades standing shoulder to shoulder, parallel to the tracks, like a single wall.

Regional government agency Metro has owned and operated the Portland Expo Center since 1994. With 330,000 square feet of exhibit space on a fifty-three-acre campus, the center hosts more than 115 events each year.

October 2016, for instance, saw the Portland Pet Expo, the Collectors West Gun and Knife Show, the Great NW Beer & Wine Fest, the Sustainable Preparedness Expo, and America’s Largest Antique and Collectible Show, among many other events catering to the interests of the people of Portland and beyond.

Beyond the rows of glass doors, the joined halls—A, B, C, D, and E—assume their true stature. Staff cross the open floors in golf carts, carrying walkie-talkies.

In early October, a home and garden show is just beginning to take shape in Hall E, the newest of the exposition buildings. A row of curtains, alternating black and white, form a makeshift wall. Beyond it, a herd of hot tubs await display, while some workers assemble various staging equipment. Hanging against black-and-white curtains from the ceiling is a series of booth numbers: 500, 600, 700, 800, 900.

In Hall C, a few wooden columns mar the otherwise uninterrupted polished concrete floor. This is

one of the older halls of the Expo Center. A truss of wooden beams supports the roof high above.

The Portland Expo Center, as befits its status as Oregon's largest multi-purpose facility, brings a lot of business to the region—about \$40 million in spending each year. Like any similar facility across the country, its value lies in its versatility. An exposition hall can be a movie stage set one week, a venue for a trade show the next, and a convention hall the week after that.

Starting in 1921, this space contained the Pacific International Livestock Exposition, where cattle and other animals were graded and auctioned. The arena here, surrounded by its wooden bleacher seating, also hosted rodeos.

In May 1942, the same space had become the "Portland Assembly Center," a prison for human beings, many of them US citizens, who had been accused of no crime. Near the entrance, a plaque commemorates the memory of this new purpose. It reads:

"May the principles inherent in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights be kept alive in the hearts of all Americans so that similar injustices will never be repeated."

On May 2, 1942, the first 364 Japanese American Portlanders reported to the Portland Assembly Center. In a 2002 interview with Alice Ito and Gail Nomura for the Densho Project, Kara Kondo recalled entering the transformed livestock exposition hall for the first time:

"You really don't have much time to even think," Kondo says in the recorded interview, available as part of the online archive at densho.org. "You want to, then you're assigned to your little small apartment that has no ceiling, just walls around you...I think you're in a daze for a while until you get your bearings."

The Wartime Civil Control Administration had boarded over the dirt floor, still containing years' worth of animal droppings from the cattle auctions and rodeos. Each family was assigned a plywood cubicle, about twelve by fifteen feet. Since the plywood stopped well short of the huge building's ceiling, sounds of all kinds traveled freely.

Kondo recalls the first impressions her senses registered upon entry: "the sound was the gate clicking behind us and the clatter of dishes around us. And smell was the smell of food cooking ... and the smell of Pine-Sol. And you could kind of smell the manure underneath with the Pine-Sol. ... You could hear the wail, crying of babies and snoring of people and ... the life that goes on around you."

"Life there was just a noisy terrible confusion as far as I was concerned," remembered Shizuko "Suzie" Sakai, who also shared her story as part of the Densho Project, "People say it was one of the hottest summers in Portland. ... I remember one day a gentleman decided that it was so hot that he would hose off the floor. ... I think he forgot that there was manure underneath the wooden planks ... It didn't take long for the water to hit the manure, and the steam started to rise, and we had the largest infestation of flies that I have ever seen in my life."

In addition to the challenging conditions of day-to-day living, families also had to live with the painful awareness of everything they'd lost and would continue to lose as a result of their imprisonment.

Frank Muramatsu, who turned sixteen a few weeks after his arrival at the Portland Assembly Center, recounted watching his family relationships dissolve in a Densho interview: "Well, from there on in ... we didn't have a family. ... I didn't speak to Mom hardly at all after that. ... We didn't eat with them, we only slept with them. ... I didn't do hardly anything with my folks. ... That was the end of my association with my family ... I lost all my ability to speak Japanese, which I didn't do too much to begin with, you know, but when that happened, that was the end of my association with them completely."

Kondo described sitting in the balcony of the Expo Center looking at the outside world. "I worked for the newsletter, and we had our little office on the balcony. And I would sit in the window and watch the lights of the Jantzen Beach, and I could see the Ferris wheels, the lights, and hear the music...I would sit in the window and listen to that knowing that that's outside. That is outside. ... It made one aware that your freedom is, is lost."

Photos taken at the time hardly portray this sense of loss. Instead, people are depicted as smiling,

industrious, and comfortable. “War Relocation Authority (WRA) photographs show what appear to be posed or staged, smiling people and did not show the poor living and employment conditions that truly existed,” says Lynn Fuchigami Longfellow, executive director of the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center. “WRA photographers were prohibited from taking shots of barbed wire, bayonets, or guard towers. Manipulated images were a clear attempt to influence public opinion and a form of propaganda to show that life in camp wasn’t all that bad.”

This is a Yellow Line train to Portland City Center, the familiar recorded voice recites. The message is exactly the same one that plays hundreds, maybe thousands of times throughout the day and night.

As the train sits at the Expo Center station, passengers looking through the car’s open doors might notice large, bronze trunks in place of the usual station benches. The sculptures, part of Otani’s installation, represent the hastily packed belongings of Japanese American families from Oregon and southwest Washington. Belongings carried to this point, this terminus—the beginning of an uncertain future.

Otani’s installation also includes a replica of the exclusion order for Portland, declaring that those who lived in the marked area had to report to a certain place. “I think seeing a map, you immediately want to locate yourself, where you live,” she says. As you do so, you might realize that “if you had lived there you would have been affected by that exclusion order.”

In September 1942, at more or less this very place, Japanese Americans boarded trains to carry them east, out of Military Zone 1, out of Oregon. The trains, their window shades drawn to keep these passengers in the dark about their destination, rolled out along the Columbia, past Pendleton, to the concentration camp at Minidoka in Idaho. There, these families would spend the remainder of the war as prisoners of the United States. At the end of the war, farmers had lost their crops, urban entrepreneurs their businesses. Many had no homes to go back to. Portland’s Japantown, once a thriving center of Japanese-owned businesses, had already become a piece of history.

Those who did try to go home were often not welcomed. In addition to the rise of local movements that sought to prevent the return of Japanese Americans to their homes, a 1945 amendment to the 1923 Alien Land Law kept many first-generation Japanese residents from their livelihoods. As Linda Tamura writes in her book *Nisei Soldiers Break Their Silence: Coming Home to Hood River*, the amendment “tied a knot in the loophole Issei had used to continue working on their farms. The new law not only prevented the first generation from owning or leasing land; it added a new twist: denying them the right to live on those farms and making it a criminal offense to work on them.”

It would not be until 1952 that those same first-generation Japanese residents became eligible for American citizenship as a result of the Immigration and Nationality, or McCarran-Walter, Act.

Today the MAX train prepares to leave the Expo Center station. The light rail will return south to Portland City Center, passing through what was once Japantown. There, the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center is getting ready to commemorate the anniversary of Executive Order 9066 on May 6, 2017, seventy-five years to the week after people first arrived at the newly renamed Portland Assembly Center.

The doors are closing. Train departing. Please hold on.

Eric Gold is a Portland-based writer.