

Painful Times, Pleasant Memories

Despite Internment, Scouts Endured, Enjoyed

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SAN JOSE -- The Boy Scouts of Troop 343, no longer boys by any measure, met here last week for their first reunion in more than 60 years. A little older, a little grayer and a smidge wiser, they greeted their fellow Scouts with delighted grins.

This was their chance to remember the good times -- the camp-outs, the flag-raising ceremonies, the stew they cooked in tin cans. But it was also a time to reflect on the circumstances that brought them together. As Scouts, they did all the things that other Boy Scouts did: They earned merit badges and learned the Scout pledge. And they did it all living behind barbed wire.

The boys, now in their seventies and eighties, were among the 120,000 Japanese Americans sent to live in internment camps during World War II. Their homes were wooden barracks in Heart Mountain in Wyoming and Manzanar and Tule Lake in California. Their campgrounds were muddy fields watched by armed guards.

While many were questioning the patriotism and loyalty of Japanese Americans on U.S. soil, the community embraced the most American of American traditions. The Scouts endured sandstorms, bitterly cold winters and the indignity of being forced to leave their homes with only the belongings they could carry, merely because they looked like the enemy.

But Thursday was their night to relive the joy of being boys again. More than two dozen Scouts gathered for what many know will be their only reunion.

George Imokawa, 76, of San Jose, slightly stooped but spiffy in his Boy Scout tie, gray slacks and blue blazer, had the honor of carrying the red-and-white troop flag to open the festivities at the convention center here. Technically it wasn't his troop's flag, but folks were willing to overlook that for the evening, seeing that after six decades, they felt lucky to have the flag, found by chance in a church storeroom a few months before.

He was flanked by younger Japanese American Scouts from two nearby churches. The honor was fitting because it was Imokawa who was the inspiration for the reunion.

The old Scouts had largely scattered once the camps were shut in 1945. Most were so occupied with building lives in a country that still was suspicious of them and their families that there wasn't time for keeping in touch.

Buddy Takata, 76, moved back to his family's farm in Campbell, near Silicon Valley, and later received an electrical engineering degree at UCLA. Imokawa and his troop leader, Art Okuno, returned to the Bay Area, married and raised families less than 10 miles apart from each other but never crossed paths.

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Last summer, quite by chance, Frank Erickson, then a Scout executive with the Santa Clara County Council, was sorting through a stack of postcard pledges for the annual Scout drive when he came across one from Imokawa. Under the heading "Scouting experience," Imokawa had written simply: Heart Mountain.

Erickson paused a moment, and then it hit him: Heart Mountain was one of 10 internment camps set up to house Japanese Americans during World War II. He was struck by the irony that even as Japanese American families were being rejected in their adopted homeland, they were embracing Americana.

"The hair on the back of my neck stood up," Erickson said. "It was one of those instances when you can't do nothing."

Together again Thursday night, surrounded by more than 200 family members and friends, was like watching pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle fall into place: When one Scout couldn't quite recall a story, others stepped up to fill in the details. "The best thing when I used to meet with you in your unit -- that toaster," Takata told Okuno. "You'd call me and talk to me, and all I could think of was that I'd get toast. And you had real butter."

Takata, now of the Los Angeles area, tried to remember how it was that he ended up a senior patrol leader of Troop 343. "You know, I'm not sure how I got that job," he said. Turning to Okuno, he queried: "Do you remember?"

"Are you kidding?" Okuno replied. "That was 60 years ago. I don't remember."

The men recalled their rivalry with Troop 379, which consisted mainly of Scouts from Los Angeles and had a much-celebrated drum and bugle corps. "We really looked up to them," Takata said. "But in '45, we took the flag" in the annual competition.

Okuno is now 83 and lives in Saratoga, Calif. But he was a sophomore at the University of California at Berkeley when his family was sent to the internment camp and he became head of Troop 343 -- one of seven troops at Heart Mountain. All the internment camps had troops, but Heart Mountain's were among the most active.

Scouting had deep roots in the Japanese American community before internment, with the desire of immigrant parents to assimilate into U.S. life. "Our parents wanted us to get integrated into American life as quickly as possible," said U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta, a Heart Mountain Scout. "Scouting was one of those activities that they thought would do that," added Mineta, the reunion's featured speaker.

He was 10 when he and his family were sent to live at the Wyoming camp. The day they left San Jose -- May 29, 1942 -- Mineta wore his Cub Scout uniform for the train ride to the assembly center in Southern California. "I have always been grateful to the Scouting movement for what it gave us," he said.

Imokawa, 13 when his family was interned, always dreamed of becoming a Boy Scout. At Heart Mountain, where his mother, Shizue, served as den mother, he earned 10 merit badges, mementos he keeps tucked away carefully even today.

Scout leaders did their best to make sure internment camp troops were like any others. But there were subtle reminders that life behind barbed wire had its limitations.

In the early days, troops weren't allowed to leave camp grounds, so overnight trips, long a staple of Scouting, were out. (The restriction eventually was lifted, and the boys took a memorable trip to Yellowstone National Park.)

Censors from the War Relocation Authority screened scouting books entering Heart Mountain to ensure that none of the material posed a security risk.

The camp had no pool, so the boys earned their swimming badges by paddling across a muddy hole.

An early attempt by Scout leaders to invite Scouts from the neighboring communities of Powell and Cody initially met resistance, Mineta recalled. "The Boy Scouts refused to come," he said. "They called it a Jap Camp. But someone told them: 'These are Boy Scouts. They wear the same uniforms you do. They study the same books you do. They go after the same merit badges as you do.' "

Eventually the Scouts from Cody came. And on the bus that drove past the guard towers and through the barbed wire fences was a boy named Alan K. Simpson, who went on to become a U.S. senator. He would be paired with Mineta, and the two would form a lifelong friendship. "We had some fun," Simpson recalled recently. "We did some devilish little things together."

Takata, who flew up for the reunion from his home in Los Angeles, brought his old knapsack and a well-worn candy box. Carefully tucked inside were his Boy Scout hats, including a version his mother sewed for him because regulation hats weren't available in the internment camp. In an album, he had photos, postcards and more than a dozen merit badge applications, carefully typed out on index cards. Back then, he knew the Scout oath by heart. Six decades later, it's a little harder for him to recite from memory, but other things about Scouting have remained in his heart.

"As I think back, maybe some of those things really impacted me and are part of my own values today: to always do your best, to be loyal."

And to do it all surrounded by friends.

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