



# YAKIMA VALLEY MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

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"Your View of the Valley Begins Here"

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## Land of Joy and Sorrow

Japanese Pioneers in the Yakima Valley



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# ON EXHIBITS

By Andy Granitto, Curator of Exhibitions



On the evening of October 2, the museum was host to the most successful exhibit opening in the 16+ years that I have been here. And it was no surprise—*Land of Joy and Sorrow: Japanese Pioneers in the Yakima Valley* had been about two years in the making, and during that time dozens of individuals, families, and institutions became involved in the exhibit and developed personal connections to the project.

Although an exhibit on the Japanese experience in the Yakima Valley—the arrival of the first pioneers in the late 19th century, the growth of a large and vital community in the early 20th century, exclusion and internment during WWII, and the eventual re-establishment of their community after the war—has been a goal for as long as I can remember, it became an “active project” in the spring of 2009. It was then that Patti Hirahara, a descendant of Yakima Valley pioneers and now living in California, visited our museum and gave us several boxes of family items and documents. She had also invited some friends from the local Japanese American community to meet her here. As they looked through Patti’s scrapbooks and photographs and talked about the past, it became apparent that the time had come to move forward with our exhibit on Yakima Valley’s Japanese American community. So we made it “official”—we placed the exhibit opening on our calendar for late summer/early fall of 2010 and planned for the exhibit to remain installed for three years.

We realized at the time that this would be an unusual exhibit project. Instead of coming from the museum’s collections and archives, all of the artifacts and stories,

and most of the historical information, would need to be provided by members of the Valley’s Japanese American community and their descendants. The gathering of these items would constitute the bulk of the work—approximately 80% primary research in advance of “exhibit work,” and 20% label-writing, exhibit design, fabrication, and installation. A production schedule was proposed: the first 8 months would be dedicated to research, documentation, and the sorting and prioritizing of the gathered data; the next 3 months would be dedicated to crafting an exhibit “storyline” from the organized data, identifying “gaps” in the story and securing the needed objects and information; and the last 3 months would be dedicated to design, label-writing, fabrication, and installation.

We knew that this project would not be easily predictable, and we knew that the production schedule was rather tight, considering our limited staff and its ongoing responsibilities. But we enthusiastically moved forward, confident of our proven ability to achieve lofty goals in half the time, and with a fraction of the staff, of other museums.

The information-gathering project was a huge success. Over the first 8 months, word of the exhibit project spread through the Japanese American community, and the list of participants and donors steadily grew. Thus, at the 8-month mark—when the majority of “hunting and gathering” was supposed to cease so we could begin to assess and organize the information and stories we had acquired—photo albums, journals, and boxes of artifacts still continued to

arrive, along with individuals to be interviewed and their stories preserved as “oral histories.”

By the Spring of 2010, there were hundreds of photos waiting to be scanned and documented (and hundreds



One World Taiko



# Sharing a Community Story



more yet to arrive), dozens of individuals who needed to be interviewed (and many more yet to hear of the project, who would be eager to contribute), and many “leads” on potential artifact donors and individuals with compelling stories to tell who all needed to be contacted. Community interest in the project was “snowballing!” I jumped into the fray of pre-production tasks, joining our amazingly dedicated volunteers and interns and dedicated staff.

Debbie Vlcek, the museum’s operations manager, took on the tasks of chief writer and editor, organizing the data which had been collected and crafting a rough draft of the exhibit “narrative” onto the minimal “skeleton outline” that had existed since the exhibit was proposed 16 months earlier. She began to work double-time—weekends and evenings—and kept a positive attitude in the face of her Sisyphean task.

And because donations and information continued to arrive, a major decision was made: Gathering would continue beyond the exhibit opening, and the exhibit itself would become a vehicle for growing our collections and archives and expanding our knowledge of the Japanese experience in the Yakima Valley. We would invite visitors to help identify historic photos; we would include a “feedback station” at the end of the exhibit, where stories and information could be shared; and we would plan for the exhibit to be revised and expanded in the coming months and years. The exhibit would never “close,” but rather change its form and content over time.

In the last 6 weeks before the exhibit opening, many tasks were done simultaneously. This is where our team of volunteers, interns, and staff rose above

and beyond. I will not attempt to list every individual and what he or she contributed, but the team moved forward like a well-oiled machine. Gallery construction and case fabrication was accomplished; hundreds of photos were scanned; historical research and fact-finding was done as needed; audio and video programs were created; artifacts were researched, documented, and prepared for exhibition; and Debbie Vlcek coordinated her writing to the day-to-day needs of the exhibit team.

The last week before the opening was amazing, and the last two hours before the gallery doors opened to the public was magical. A dozen volunteers, interns, and staff, coordinated in four teams, moved through the gallery, from entry to exit. The lead team applied vinyl “header labels” to the wall; next was the team attaching labels and interpretive panels; the lighting team was right on their heels, adding light to each display and label. Team four scurried among the other three teams, picking up tools, vacuuming the carpet, and preparing the gallery for the “unveiling” at 5P.M. When John Baule stepped in at 5 and asked if we were ready, the last light bulb was being screwed in and the last tools were being loaded on a cart. As we escaped out the back door with our tool carts, John was welcoming visitors into the exhibit ...at 5:05!

The opening extravaganza, complete with Japanese Taiko drummers, was an incredible event; if you were not here, you missed something truly special.



Eddie Iseri and Yasuko Nakamura pose with photographs taken of them as children.