

Reverend Daniel Ogata, A man whose country turned on him

Editors Note: Periodically throughout the upcoming semester the S&B will feature articles on people of interest in both the college and Grinnell community. The following is the first such article.

by Richard Letchinger

Reverend Daniel Ogata has been a Presbyterian minister since 1958 and has spent the last seven years here at the First United Presbyterian Church of Grinnell. But what makes Ogata's story such a compelling one is that, like many Japanese Americans, during the Second World War he and his family were interned in a "relocation camp" in the western United States.

When you first meet Rev. Ogata you see a warm, relaxed, casually dressed man who appears very devoted to his religion and his profession. A man who, you could guess, takes life as it comes and makes the most of it. But when you begin to talk to him you realize that his life has not always been this easy and relaxed.

In 1910, Ogata's father immigrated to America to work on the Northern Pacific railroad. Like most immigrants to the United States, he intended to take full advantage of the American Dream. So, after working and saving for six years, Ogata's father and another man were able to purchase 3,000 acres of swamp land (in the San Joaquin Valley) from the government at \$3 an acre.

A fire that Ogata said was "in a way a blessing" turned the once infertile swamp land into very rich soil capable of growing anything, and the Ogata family suddenly found themselves owning some of the finest farmland in the West. "That fire left the swamp land with a new layer of ashes. We tried growing onions at first. After they worked so well we found we could grow anything," Ogata said.

Born in 1919, Ogata was raised working on his family's farm near Stockton, California, where they also owned a home. He stayed there until his early teens when his father decided to send him to Japan to attend school. "Our parents wanted their children to be aware of both cultures," Ogata explained.

He attended a college prep school until his parents called him back to the States in 1938 when the Japanese invaded China.

"My parents called me back," Ogata said, "because they were afraid that I might get drafted into the Japanese army." So Ogata returned to the United States to work on his family's farm.

For most Americans old enough to remember, the morning of December 7, 1941 evokes a vivid memory. Everyone knows where they were when they first heard the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, especially Ogata. That single event would alter the course of the rest of his life.

"I was out in the vineyard, I think pruning, that Sunday morning. We usually finished by 10 so that we could get ready for church by 11," explained Ogata. "We stopped to get gas and the attendant asked if we were Japanese. We said yes and then he told us that 'as of today we can't sell you gas—you are the enemy.'"



photo by Aldo Fusaro

"I couldn't believe it, so we went to buy a paper and ran into the same 'no sale' problem," Ogata went on to say. "We didn't hear for sure until we got home and turned on the radio."

Ogata explained that from then on he and his family were considered "enemy aliens." They were subject to a curfew and from that point on their travel was restricted to a three mile area. This was especially a problem for the Ogatas since their farm was 14 miles from their home. Ogata explained that they had to petition the F.B.I. for permission to go to work.

By January of 1942 the rumor that the Japanese-Americans would be moved was strong, but Ogata said that he really didn't believe it, "I felt that it was just a rumor, that it couldn't happen in a free country."

On February 19, 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which gave the army blanket power to "deal" with the enemy alien "problem." The order effected 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry within the western coastal area. But as Ogata hastens to point out, many of those 110,000 people were children born in the State; "the kids were American citizens."

"We had to get ready to move almost overnight," Ogata explained. "They (the government officials) told us that we could each take one suitcase—that's all."

They packed up and were immediately sent to temporary facilities which were set up at race tracks and county fairgrounds where they lived in horse stalls.

While in the temporary camp Ogata's family heard that their farm had been robbed. The government had said that they would hold all the property owned by the enemy aliens until they returned from the camps. This was an important point to the Ogatas by now, since they had a 400-acre vineyard with many pieces of expensive farm machinery.

"We padlocked the warehouse, garage, and house, and we also boarded up the windows," Ogata said. "But when we contacted the police about the theft they told us that we weren't entitled to any protection. And one week

later the government confiscated all the property, auctioned it off, and used the proceeds for the war effort.

"The thing that was hardest for me to believe though," Rev. Ogata recounted, "was the breakdown in law and order that was occurring."

Then, in July of 1942, after four and one half months of living at the track, the enemy aliens were moved by train to their permanent "relocation camp."

"There were 800 people on the train. Men in boxcars and the women, especially the pregnant ones (of which there were 18), in passenger coaches." Ogata went on to explain that he was made the orderly for the train. "They just put a red-cross armband on me and I was to serve as medic for 800 people!"

Ogata had had no medical training and he said that he was "saved" by four registered nurses who were also on the train.

The train trip was a rough ride over the Rocky Mountains to Arkansas, where they finally reached Camp Rohwer in Desha County. "It was a 1000 acre site where they had built army barracks," Ogata said. "Each barrack was 80 feet long and 50 feet wide. They sectioned it off into five rooms, one for each family.

"Believe me, there was no privacy. There were beds and nothing else. We were permitted to go to the city dump in the town of McGehee to look for things, but only when we were with armed guards."

According to Ogata, who spent three years in the camp, life was "nothing glamorous." "We were given jobs; we worked eight hours a day and were paid \$19 a month. They gave us food, but everything else had to come from that money."

Ogata explained that the people in the town would give them the "silent treatment," but that the soldiers who patrolled the camp were extremely friendly. "They couldn't understand the government's actions either."

In further describing the atmosphere inside the camp, Ogata said that, "there was a small group that vented their anger, but most everyone accepted the situation as being a result of war hysteria."

Ogata was permitted to leave the camp. He went alone to Chicago where he worked in a factory making gun mounts. But the rest of his family wasn't released until after the victory over Japan in 1945.

"The government gave us no money; you were on your own," Ogata explained. (The government did attempt to make some restitution in the late 40's. They offered to repay one-tenth of the losses incurred. But Ogata pointed out that most of the people were too stubborn to take the offer at first. By the

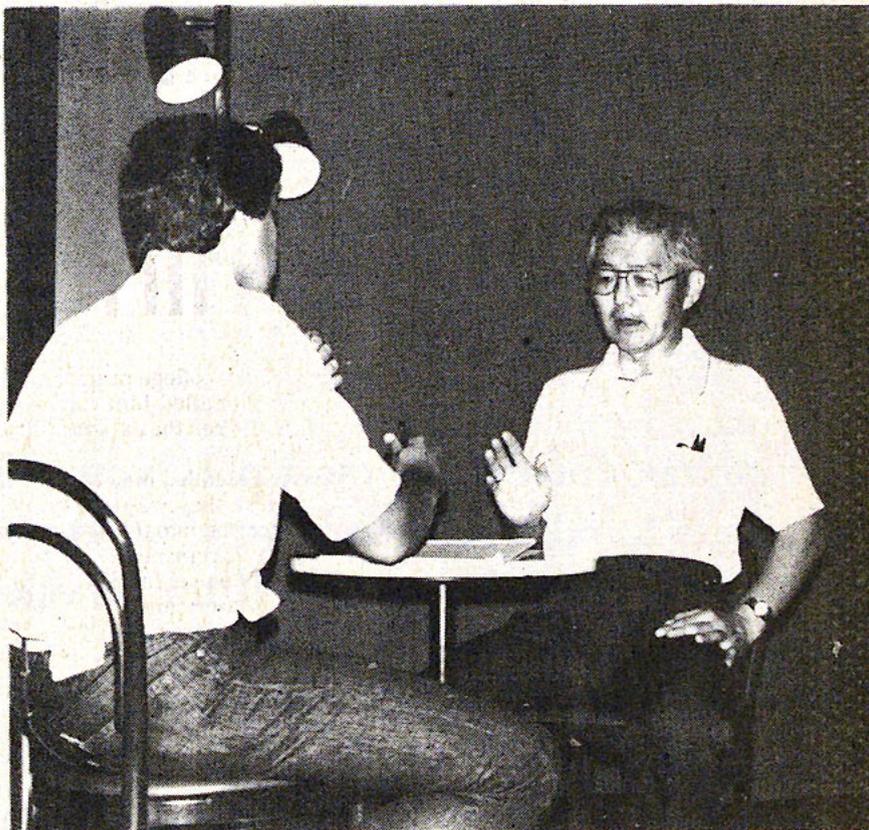


photo by Aldo Fusaro

*"I felt that it was just a rumor,
that it couldn't happen in a free country."*

time they decided that they would take the money, the fund had run out.)

So Ogata worked two jobs for 16 hours a day to be able to bring his family to Chicago, and later to pay for college.

"During the war things looked bleak for me," Ogata said. "When I was 15 or 16 in Japan I felt the urge to serve humanity in a ministerial cause. I had looked up to the American missionaries in the country. But I also knew that to become a minister I'd have to have four years of college, and then three years at the seminary. I didn't know how I'd ever make it."

Ogata did make it. He pushed through school on the money his wife made working as a secretary for the dean at the school he was attending.

After many years as an associate pastor at churches around the Iowa area, he settled in Grinnell, where his daughter, Lynn, is a junior at the college.

Recounting his thoughts at the time of the internment, Ogata expressed no ill-feelings. "I felt no animosity against

my own country. I had the feeling that eventually it would all be justified. I also had no divided loyalty during the war either, I felt 100 percent American."

Asked if he was bitter about his experience Ogata explained that the "Japanese culture has a saying that says that no matter what happens, there is nothing we can do but accept it, and I do.

"I am sad about having lost four years of my education, though. I started college in my 30's and now I regret that I'm enjoying the ministry so much—that there was so much wasted time."

The only thing that Ogata does feel strongly about is the desire to get an official apology from somebody in charge at the time. Acknowledging that it would be difficult because of the amount of time that has passed, Ogata still feels that it would make a difference. "All I would really like is for someone to say 'we made a mistake.'"

-with research by Jeanne Dzurenko