

For presentation to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians,
Roosevelt Hotel Terrace Room, New York City. Monday, November 23, 1981.

TESTIMONY

by Charles T. Nagao

Members of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians,

My name is Charles Nagao, age 65, residing in Vineland, New Jersey. My occupation is assistant manager - International Division, Wheaton Industries, Millville, New Jersey.

I appreciate this opportunity to appear before this Commission to talk of my life's experiences since arriving to Seabrook, New Jersey, in mid-December, 1944, from the Manzanar Concentration Camp, California. I was accompanied by my wife, Mary, and twin daughters, who were five years old. In May, 1945, my father-in-law and mother-in-law came out from Manzanar and joined us at Seabrook.

The cross-country train trip from Reno, Nevada, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was completed with a change-over at Chicago. My wife and daughters fortunately had seats all the way, but I had to stand all the way from Reno to Chicago. Almost the entire passengers were soldiers returning from the Pacific Theater of the war. NO UNPLEASANTNESS EXPERIENCED WITH THE SOLDIERS ON THE TRAIN.

Upon arrival at the B&O Station at Philadelphia, we boarded a Seabrook Farms Company trailer with makeshift seats and roof for the 45-or-so-mile trip to Seabrook, New Jersey. Around 2 a.m. upon arriving at Seabrook, we found ourselves sick with nausea and headache from exhaust gas seepage from the tractor into the trailer.

I would now like to talk as best to my recollection on life at Seabrook going back to its beginning from December, 1944, on.

Housed in cinder block barracks--three bedrooms, living room, kitchen with coal stove and icebox and a bathroom with shower stall. The rental charge was at the going local area rate.

I was employed at the Seabrook Frozen Food Factory as a laborer at 53¢-an-hour rate until joining the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Food Union after 30 days when the hourly rate was raised to 60¢. This was a going rate in the food-packing industry in this area.

At one time there were around 3,000 Japanese Americans living and working at Seabrook Farms Company. Many of them have departed through the years and there are now around 500 of us left.

Charles T. Nagao

Resettlement was made not without its problems. I recall my rejection of the company bus provided for transporting us six miles to Bridgeton, the county seat, for shopping, etc. as a protective measure when a Public Service Bus was available. The mere thought of having my free movement denied upon just having left the concentration camp was repugnant. I was determined to pursue a life style on the outside as a free American.

During our employment years at Seabrook Farms Company, we were involved in the vigorous expansion since our arrival in the mid 1940's to the late 1950's, and it was my desire to advance to one of the top managerial positions in the manufacturing section for which myself as well as other Nisei's were confident in assuming. But, alas, as we came to accept and realize, any promotions to the top positions were made available to the Caucasians by the company. It was many years after my departure from Seabrook Farms Company that I learned of the appointment of a Nisei as the general manager of the company in 1979, who has made it to the top; and now within two years of attaining the top post, the company after a gradual decline since the early 1960's will be closing out soon unless bought up by someone. The unwritten discriminatory policies practiced by Seabrook Farms Company in its promotions is an often discussed parallel in many other companies where Nisei's are employed.

I can attest with pride that the Issei's and Nisei's have applied themselves creditably during their working years at Seabrook Farms Company where we had worked harmoniously among the following diversified groups of people--local native black and white, Jamaicans, Barbadians, black and white college students (girls) from the South, German prisoners of war, displaced Europeans from Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Germany.

My employment at Seabrook Farms Company was severed in September, 1963, after a 20-year stay when the declining company had cut 77 salaried managerial personnel. After a 6-month employment with the Comstock Foods, Division of Borden Company at Rockville, New York, I returned to South Jersey joining the International Division of Wheaton Industries in Millville, New Jersey, in May, 1964, to the present.

I would like to touch upon another aspect of our life's difficulty when both my wife and I had to work at the frozen food factory to make ends meet. We had to work on opposite shifts that operated 10 to 11 hours a shift due to the necessity of having one of us at home to cover the needs of our daughters. Having to work separately for weeks and weeks during the busy fresh food processing season does not add for a harmonious and satisfactory married life.

In the late 1940's to early 1950's for a period of a few years span during the winter lull, a Seabrook brand promotional program was set up to send men and women out into the super

Charles T. Nagao

Page 3

markets, department stores and local grocery stores up and down the Eastern Seaboard from Maine to the deep South; and I recall of the four groups of men headed by four white leaders only one group leader was willing to lead the group of about ten Nisei's, myself included, causing the Nisei's to be all grouped together-- here again showing their (the white men's) discrimination towards us. Furthermore, it took some doings on our part to convince the Management that the Nisei's were capable in representing the company out in the marketing area.

Working in a food processing and packing plant was not my idea of a lifetime job. Nonetheless, the 20-year stay has provided us a livelihood in taking care of aged mother and father-in-laws until their deaths in 1954 and 1961 and in our daughters' attainment of their college degrees from the respective colleges attended, and the Good Lord blessed us with the birth of a son in 1950.

The City of Bridgeton, population around 20,000, the county seat of Cumberland, 6 miles south of Seabrook Village, is the nearest shopping area which was accessible by the Philadelphia-Bridgeton Public Service Bus, taxi and the Seabrook Farms bus referred to previously. There were merchants in Bridgeton who discriminated against the Japanese Americans, and we avoided them until in time they became aware of our excellent buying habits, i.e., paying promptly in cash, buying without financing, etc., and brought out the welcome mats. I believe that many of our non-English speaking Issei's had absorbed the brunt of the discrimination.

My first confrontation in breaking the wall of discrimination occurred at the Bridgeton Bowling Alley in 1945 when the pin setting boys (black and white) refused to set up the bowling pins because, as they said, we were their enemy; but knowing that these boys were young teenagers, I was convinced that they could be talked into setting up the pins by cajoling them and indicating our tipping for their services would be very rewarding. In the course of the next 3 to 4 hours, I saw the breakdown coming from some of the pinsetters and was finally able to begin the bowling game. The bowling alley manager, who was very receptive to our bowling, was very much relieved that I was able to get the pins set up without having him attempt to pressure the pinsetters himself.

My wife, Mary, had worked at Seabrook Farms Frozen Food Company from early 1945 to 1956 at which time she had accepted a job at the Cumberland County Clerk's Office and after faithfully working for 25½ years has just retired on September 30, 1981. Several years prior to her retirement, she thought she would be promoted to the supervisory position when it became available because of her 20 years' experience and knowledge of the operation. However, to her bitter disappointment, the promotion went to a white woman who had just joined the Clerk's Office.

Charles T. Nagao

Page 4

After both of us having worked 13 and 20 years respectively at Seabrook Farms Company, it is a great disappointment that the company did not set up any pension program for the non-Union supervisory and managerial personnel to be vested and made available at ages 62 or 65.

It pains both my wife and me that her mother has died in 1954 after being bedridden shortly after arriving at Seabrook in 1945 of continuous advancing arthritis with excruciating pains which we feel was due to the damp cement floor and cinder block walls of the apartment. In 1949 we moved to a company-owned bungalow with wooden walls and floors in the hopes it might alleviate my mother-in-law's arthritic pains; and while this change had helped her pains somewhat, she was bedridden until her death.

In addition to the testimonies of Mr. Murono and Mr. Yakabi on their painful life's experiences from Peru to the United States and to Seabrook, I would just like to add about my confrontation at the United States Immigration and Naturalization Services at Newark, New Jersey, in mid 1950's because of the stateless status of Mr. S. Arasaki, an Okinawa-born Peru immigrant working at Seabrook Farms who was forceably brought into the United States by the United States Government. The confrontation was in convincing the immigration officer that the permission to bring in his wife and son for a visit was the responsibility of his office which was finally granted. Mr. Arasaki is now back in Peru with his family leading a normal and satisfactory life.

In conclusion I would like to state that while during these 39 years those of us who are at present pursuing a seemingly normal life style 3,000 miles away from home, we were uprooted by our government under Executive Order 9066 and have endured humiliations and hardships by this wrongful act in incarcerating 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry into concentration camps without due trial.

Therefore, I trust the members of this distinguished Commission will apprise the Congress of the United States of the Government's wrongdoing and the necessity for its redress with recommendation of monetary compensation commensurate with this unprecedented act.

Thank you.

6 1981