

The Yellow Peril of 1920

By Kelly Cannon-Miller

“As to Burt, we’ll show him a juniper tree with a rope hung over a limb and see if he can take the hint,” the incensed rancher informed his hearers.
— *The Bend Bulletin*, May 20, 1920

While researching for our latest temporary exhibit, *What If Heroes Were Not Welcome Home?*, I had the pleasure of being introduced via email to the son of Yori Tambara, who was born in Metolius in 1920 and graduated from Bend High School in 1940. Through the emails, we eventually got around to discussing the elephant in the room—why was Yori the only person of Asian heritage in his high school yearbooks?

To answer the question, one has to understand American-Japanese relations of a hundred years ago. The rise of Imperial Japan created significant societal changes within Japan as well as Japan’s role as an international power. The relationship between the United States and Japan from 1900-1920 was tumultuous, and a major point of contention was the treatment of Japanese immigrants by the United States. Japanese immigration was treated with suspicion as proof of imperialist goals and a desire to colonize America, particularly in the west and Hawaii.

Anti-Asian exclusion policies were not new. Between 1850 and 1882, measures to exclude Chinese immigration appeared in the western states and culminated at the federal level as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration for ten years. The exclusion acts created a vacuum for laborers that Japanese immigrants then began to fill. Coupled with the annexation of Hawaii in 1899, which freed thousands of Japanese laborers from contract labor on sugar plantations, as well as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Japanese immigration to the United States exploded, reaching as much as 1,000 immigrants a month by 1906.

In an attempt to ease tensions, President Theodore Roosevelt entered into “The Gentlemen’s Agreement” of 1907-08 with the Emperor of Japan, in which they agreed to a series of steps to limit Japanese immigration into the United States, while the United States promised fair and equal treatment for Japan’s citizens. A brief success, the issue of treatment of Japanese immigrants and other conflicts led to further tensions and new treaty negotiations between Japan and America in 1917.

It was in that climate that George Shima and George L. Burt, both wealthy potato farmers from California’s Delta Valley, used Burt’s Portland-Deschutes Company to buy thousands of acres in Deschutes County for seed farms to supplement their holdings in California. They also had among their investing partners the extremely wealthy and

influential financier Herbert Fleishhaker, who was well known for his advocacy in developing irrigation and electric systems in California—and farmers in Central Oregon, especially north Deschutes County, were desperately awaiting irrigation development. Burt and Fleishhaker were Caucasian, as were their other investment partners, but Shima had immigrated from Japan and many of their California farm employees and experts were Japanese. Regardless of Shima’s success turning unwanted wetlands into a million dollar potato industry in California, or abandoning his birth name to become George Shima the “Potato King,” he could not escape being viewed simply as an example of the threat of Japanese land ownership. Their land purchase led to a flurry of anti-Japanese sentiment and action throughout Central Oregon in a matter of weeks.

Burt and Shima brought Japanese laborers from their California properties up to their ranches at Powell Butte and Lower Bridge to begin the hard work of clearing their lands. Immediate negative reaction resulted in an agreement to only have three Japanese laborers per ranch at any given time. In May 1920, F. E. Pellett of Terrebonne appeared before the Bend Commercial Club to appeal for assistance in fighting the ‘yellow peril’ occurring north of Redmond.

The report of the meeting in *The Bend Bulletin* on May 20 clearly shows the situation had escalated to a dangerous point. Pellett makes clear that violence against the owners was not out of the range of action his fellow farmers and ranchers were willing to take. Including a threat to lynch Burt, he informed the club that Burt and Shima had hired a gunman to protect their workers. Pellett declared that if the gunman did not leave the country peaceably “there would be need for coffins and a coroner.”

The Bend Commercial Club responded to Pellett’s concerns by denouncing land ownership by aliens and assuring Pellett they would look into the matter. Over the course of several days, they deferred voting on any action before allowing George Burt to defend the company’s plans. When he did so, Burt declared it had been necessary to reverse their decision to employ only three Japanese per property because available white laborers could not be found, no matter how hard they had tried. They had informed the Terrebonne Farm Bureau of their immediate need to bring additional Japanese laborers in order to meet spring planting. Burt outlined many failed attempts to work with the Terrebonne Farm Bureau, citing that a viable business venture was being prevented from enriching the agricultural markets of Deschutes County by individuals who “had an axe to grind.” Despite his assurances that his company had no intention of selling parcels of land to Japanese, the Bend Commercial Club went on record as opposed to land ownership by aliens. One after one, the regional farm bureaus, the American Legion posts, and other organizations throughout Deschutes, Crook, and Jefferson County voted on resolutions prohibiting land ownership by aliens, and petitioning state legislators and the

governor's office to pass a statewide measure to block alien land ownership. On June 3, the paper again reported Burt's appeals to the Bend Commercial Club for assistance in smoothing over the matter and stating that they had relieved their security person and stopped work clearing the land. Burt again asserts the company has the best interests of agriculture in Central Oregon in mind with no intention to allow Japanese land ownership, and citing the continued lack of available labor.

Without their security, on June 10, 1920, *The Bend Bulletin* reported that a group of riders attacked the Terrebonne ranch, forced the Japanese employees out of the fields, threatened them, and even stole from them. Burt and several of their investors toured ranch post-raid and talked to neighbors. They reported to the Commercial Club that most of their neighbors had absolutely no issues with the Japanese employees or the company plans, and in fact wanted their development plans to move forward. They asserted it was a small group leading the claims and attacks against the

business, but they were having an affect on their ability to clear, plant, and harvest their seed potato crops. The Commercial Club walked a fine line between support of the development as long as no Japanese owned any land, including George Shima, while at the same time advocating for passage of alien exclusion laws at the state level.

An investigation into the scandal by the Governor's office confirmed the sentiments Burt encountered. The report found that most large land owners in the area favored the investment brought by the Shima-Burt-Fleishhacker project and while generally opposed to land ownership, they were not opposed to Japanese immigration if it meant development.

It was too little too late. The raid on the Terrebonne property was the beginning of the end. Shima, Burt, and Fleishhacker faced legal attacks on business ventures back home in California—Fleishhacker was sued for fraud on the auspices that loaning money to George Shima violated the Alien Land Act of California, and Shima struggled to keep his lands under California's new laws. By 1922, Shima, Burt's Portland-Deschutes Company, and Fleishhacker divested themselves of Central Oregon. In 1926, George Shima died of a stroke at the age of 62. Pallbearers at this funeral included the Emeritus Chancellor of Stanford University and the mayor of San Francisco. His estate was valued between \$15 and 17 million, and he left a legacy of public service and leadership. Back in Central Oregon, the willingness of Japanese Americans or others of Asian heritage to come here in the wake of the scandal was extremely low and remained low until after World War II. The Tambara family and a few families like them remained unique in the community.

While the governor's report indicated the community was not united in opposition of Japanese immigration, views expressed in the news through letters and editorials clearly sent the message to stay out. An editorial by *The Madras Pioneer*, reprinted in *The Bend Bulletin* on December 2, 1920, makes it perfectly clear:

That the people of Jefferson County are willing to bear their fair share of the white man's burden, there is no doubt. This is definitely proven by the Indian situation and their fair treatment of the negro question. But it is too much to expect them to in any way tolerate Japanese residence in the county. We have no room for the yellow men, and we don't want them. We desire to see any and every white person reside or own land here and proper, but it is not fair to expect that Oregon people will allow the condition to exist with the yellow people as it now does in California.

Xenophobic violence and anti-Japanese sentiment at the beginning of the 20th century are the academic answer to the Tambara's original question of why Yori Tambara was the lone Asian in his 1940 senior year book. The "Yellow Peril" shaped our communities, just as the internment of thousands of families—including the Tambara family—reshaped our communities following World War II. True to Yori's generation, the Greatest Generation, the childhood memories of 1930s Central Oregon he left his family were not about exclusion; they were about riding his bike up and down Pilot Butte, summer jobs with the irrigation company, and showing them his favorite places on a summer vacation in the 1960s. Yori Tambara was born and raised in Central Oregon and his family's immigrant history is a part of America's immigrant history, good and bad.

**RIDERS DRIVE
JAPS OUT OF
SPUD FIELDS**

SELF-STYLED BEND
MEN PILFER

WASTE IS REPORTED

Two Cars of Seed Potatoes Must Be
Sent Back From Terrebonne,
Says Burt—Club's Stand
Appreciated.

How five riders, representing themselves to be from Bend, drove his Japanese laborers from the fields at his Lower Bridge ranch recently, threatened violence against them, and even pilfered \$180 from one of the men, was told Tuesday night by George L. Burt, potato grower and Central Oregon land owner, on his return from a day's trip through the Terrebonne and Lower Bridge sections. "I found the Japanese badly frightened," he said, "and learned that friends in the neighborhood had succeeded, with the utmost difficulty, in persuading them to remain on the ranch."