

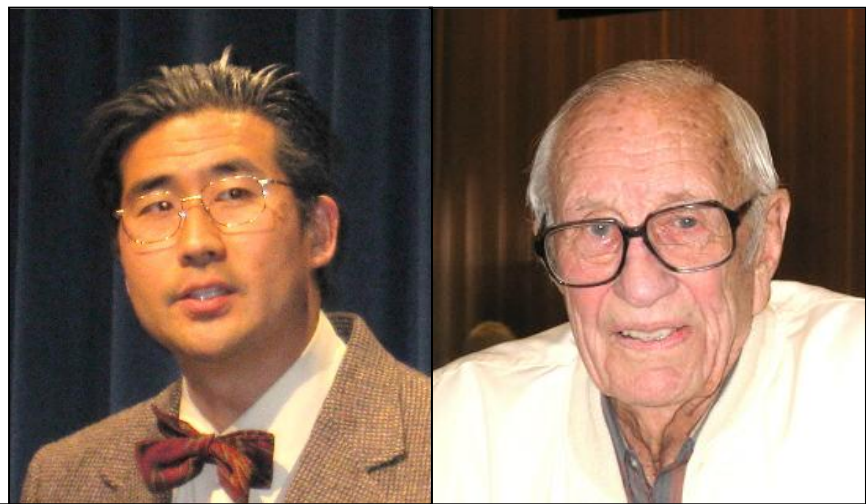
Northern California Time of Remembrance

Honoring Two American Heroes

- by Andy Noguchi

A retired hakujin (Caucasian) farmer and a retired Japanese American professor, both in their 90s, living over 1,000 miles apart – what could they have in common? A standing ovation by a packed audience of 200 people provided a clue for both farmer Bob Fletcher, attending in person, and Professor Gordon Hirabayashi, through a play about his life, at the Northern California Time of Remembrance on February 20th in Sacramento. Both heroically stood up for justice, not when it was easy but during the intense racism and hysteria of World War II.

This annual event was sponsored by the Placer County, Lodi, Sacramento, and Florin JACL Chapters and ably chaired by Ms. Christine Umeda. It capped off a 7 week docent-led tour of the award-winning exhibit “Uprooted: The Japanese American wartime experience” at the California State Museum of History, Women, and the Arts.



Actor Ryun Yu in “Dawn’s Light” as college student Gordon Hirabayashi

Retired farmer Bob Fletcher, 98, honored at Time of Remembrance program

Confronted with the daunting might of the police, courts, army, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, University of Washington college student and Quaker Gordon Hirabayashi chose to courageously say “No” to the curfew, evacuation, and internment of Japanese Americans in 1942.

“Dawn’s Light”, the masterfully crafted work by playwright Jeanne Sakata, enthralled the audience with both the personal and legal struggles of the young college student. Sakata’s expert research and interviews with Hirabayashi came to life in his awakening to the injustice of the segregated stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and even the YMCA of the time.

Ryun Yu’s one man portrayal of not only Gordon Hirabayashi, but also his family members, friends, and antagonists in jail and at the courthouse, was nothing short of spell-binding. Hirabayashi’s agonizing discussion with his mother about having to leave the family over his protest nearly ripped the heart out of many Japanese Americans attending and those who hold

family dear. The humor, tenderness, and pathos deftly depicted the human side of a larger than life Hirabayashi sometimes seen as the Rosa Parks of Japanese Americans.

A pre-World War II agriculture inspector, Bob Fletcher was a neighbor to many Japanese Americans in the 2,500 member strawberry and Tokay grape-growing community of Florin on the outskirts of Sacramento. Bob never knew what challenges would face him after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Now 98 years old, his too rare story of kindness and standing up for justice hasn't been told widely enough. People are all too familiar with the other stories of war opportunists "buying" Japanese American possessions - \$1 for a set of dishes, \$25 for a car, or \$200 for a house.

Despite being called a "Jap lover" and the threat to his safety, Bob Fletcher volunteered to take care of three Japanese American farms owned by the Tsukamoto, Okamoto, and Nitta families, quitting his own job. As Bob told the Sacramento Bee recently, "I did know a few of them pretty well and never did agree with the evacuation." "They were the same as anybody else. It was obvious they had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor."

The dangers to Bob and those who stood up were real. Someone shot a bullet into the Tsukamoto barn. The stories abound of Japanese Americans homes being burned down and tractors burned out by supposed friends in Florin during the war period.

After paying the taxes and mortgages, plus doing all the hard work farming 90 acres, Bob Fletcher still saved half the profits for the Tsukamotos, Okamotos, and Nittas on their return from camp. Al Tsukamoto had just asked Bob to save their farms for them. Bob gave them a new life and start at a time when only 200 Japanese Americans came home to a former Florin community of 2,500.

People remarked that this "Dawn's Light" performance and recognition of Bob Fletcher was one of the best Time of Remembrance events they had ever seen. It certainly struck home. Many felt inspired by the stories of two American heroes - retired professor Gordon Hirabayashi and farmer Bob Fletcher - to stand up for justice.