

Tule Lake video teaches him his past

Japanese-American
directs film on camp

By KATHLEEN BUCKLEY
Staff writer

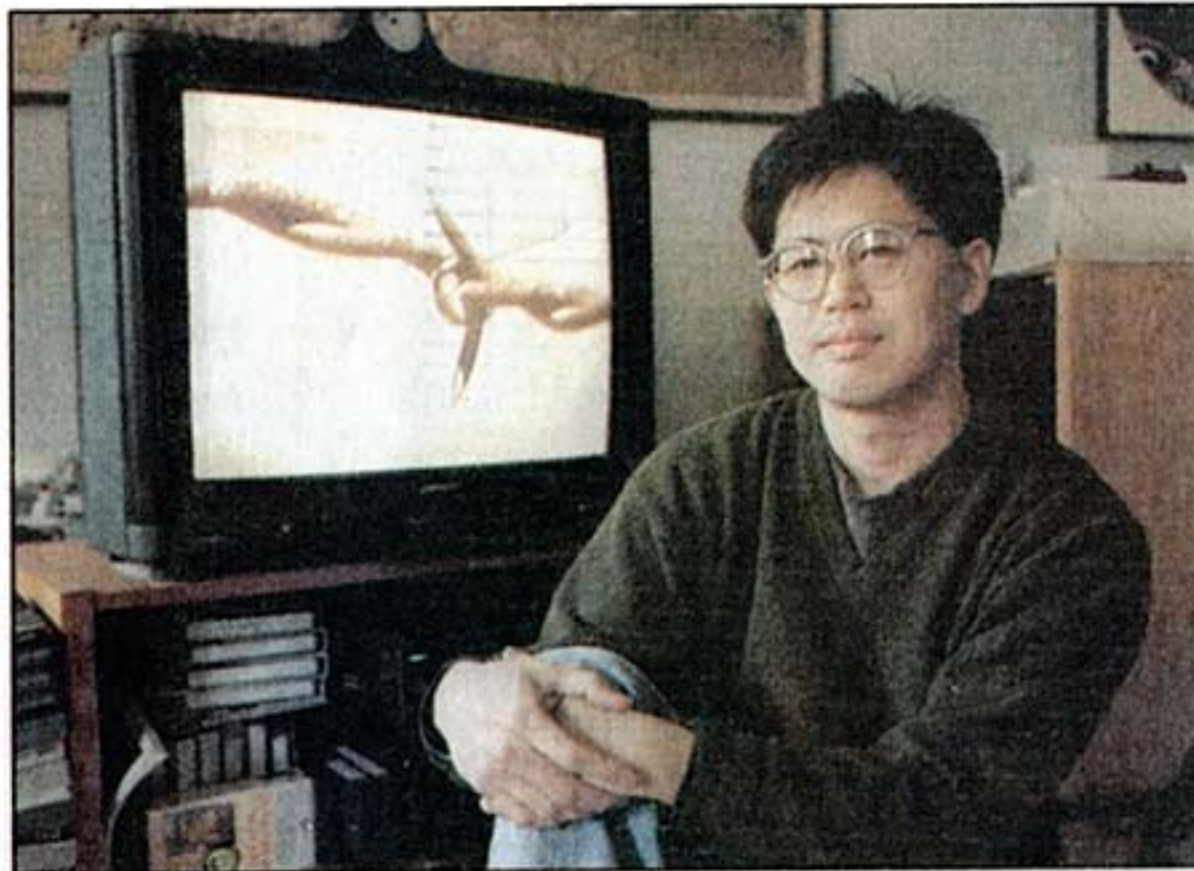
If Scott Tsuchitani follows his dream of being a filmmaker, he can credit a blemished, desolate spot of California geography.

Tule Lake.

Now nothing more than ruins, it was the Northern California segregation center for 18,355 Japanese-Americans forced into exile during World War II.

Tsuchitani's parents, Tomomi and Toshiko Tsuchitani, were sent there in 1942 as teens. But for their son, who grew up in Walnut Creek, it wasn't part of his life until he volunteered to work on a film project and found himself directing a video for the Tule Lake Pilgrimage Committee.

"Mom and Dad hadn't talked about this much," he said. "Mom



DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/Times

SCOTT TSUCHITANI started out as a volunteer but ended up directing a video on the Tule Lake detention camp where Japanese-Americans, including his parents, were held during World War II.

sometimes referred to this and that 'at camp' and I thought, 'Wow, mom's family went camping a lot.' "

In the end, however, another generation's memories of the most despised of America's 10 desert detention camps became his story.

The video, a 33-minute documentary produced and directed by Tsuchitani titled "Meeting at Tule

Lake," tells the story of the camp where loyalty to the United States was the only real question. Answer no to either of two loyalty questions posed by the government and you'd end up at Tule Lake.

The video contains interviews of detainees, a poem and black-and-white historical photographs, some

Please see **TULE**, back page



THIS SNAPSHOT, taken from a film documentary, shows the detainees of the relocation camp near the Oregon border.

Tule

FROM PAGE 1A

smuggled out of the camp during the internment. It examines the emotions of coming of age in the camps, loyalty, racism, identity and life after the camp. It was released this month after a test run during an August pilgrimage by Japanese-American families to the camp ruins 45 minutes south of Klamath Falls, Ore., just inside the California border.

Tsuchitani, a 32-year-old engineer, first got involved because of his passion for film and an interest in Japanese-American history that was just beginning to surface.

"It turned out I was the only one who knew anything about production, so I became the director," he said.

That was in April. The video had to be ready for viewing by Aug. 24 for a pilgrimage to the barbed-wire reservation, eight hours north of the Bay Area.

Some video had already been shot and interviews scheduled when he took over. It left Tsuchitani with the challenge of creating a script that worked with vastly different styles, historical photographs and a theme that was being redefined as the script was being shot. It was his first project.

Tsuchitani discovered the common thread when he met Hiroshi Kashiwagi.

Kashiwagi, a poet and playwright, penned a poem on the first bus ride to a Tule Lake pilgrimage in 1975.

Kashiwagi stayed up all night writing it, Tsuchitani said.

"I search for reasons why I came after 30 some years Tule Lake, Tule Lake — that was a name I dared not mention

spoken warily, always with hesitation, never voluntarily."

Kashiwagi read the full poem into Tsuchitani's camera. The sparse audience on the set wept.

And the poem became the "moment" that narrates pain in the hearts of the interned and their children.

"Once we had that, I breathed a sigh of relief," Tsuchitani said.

The poem, followed by personal interviews, changed the film's perspective and fleshed out the theme that was to carry the young filmmaker through sleepless production nights to the finished product.

Between July 1943 and its closure in 1946, the Tule Lake detention center held 6,940 American-born males, 5,549 American-born females; 3,758 foreign-born males; and 2,108 foreign-born females.

Many were deported, some were relocated, and some ended up with no citizenship at all when their countries of origin, like Peru, refused their return.

In all, of the more than 6,407 who were sent to Japan, 4,400 were American-born.

"One of the things I wanted to do was to touch on the complexity and contradictions, the deep convictions tested by the segregation issue," Tsuchitani said.

Life in the Tule Lake Center differed materially from that in other centers and certainly had little in common with life outside, said Takasumi Kojima in his exhaustive background report prepared for the August pilgrimage.

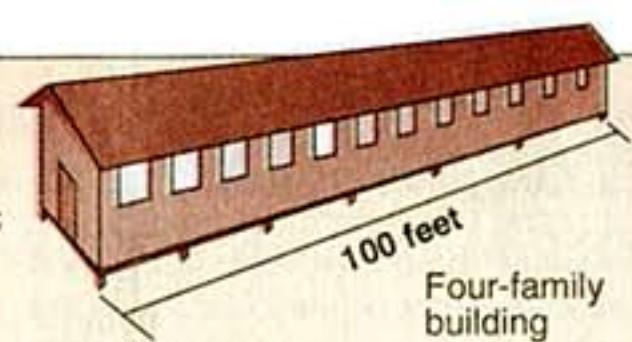
"The psychological atmosphere of Tule Lake life was more akin to the concentration camp, particularly after the Army occupation of the center, the effects of which were never fully erased," Kojima said.

Tsuchitani said that even today the Japanese-American community

Tule Lake center

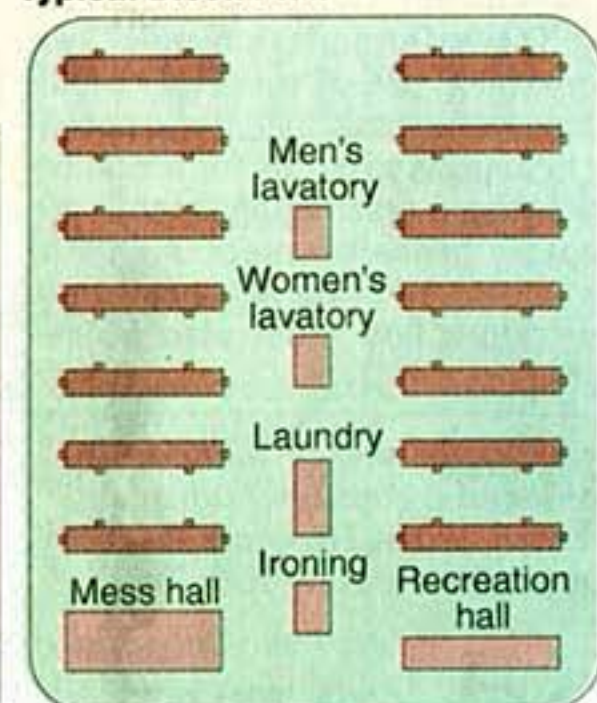
Internment of Japanese-Americans

The film "Meeting at Tule Lake," directed by Scott Tsuchitani, documents the lives of the 18,355 Japanese-Americans at the segregation center during World War II.

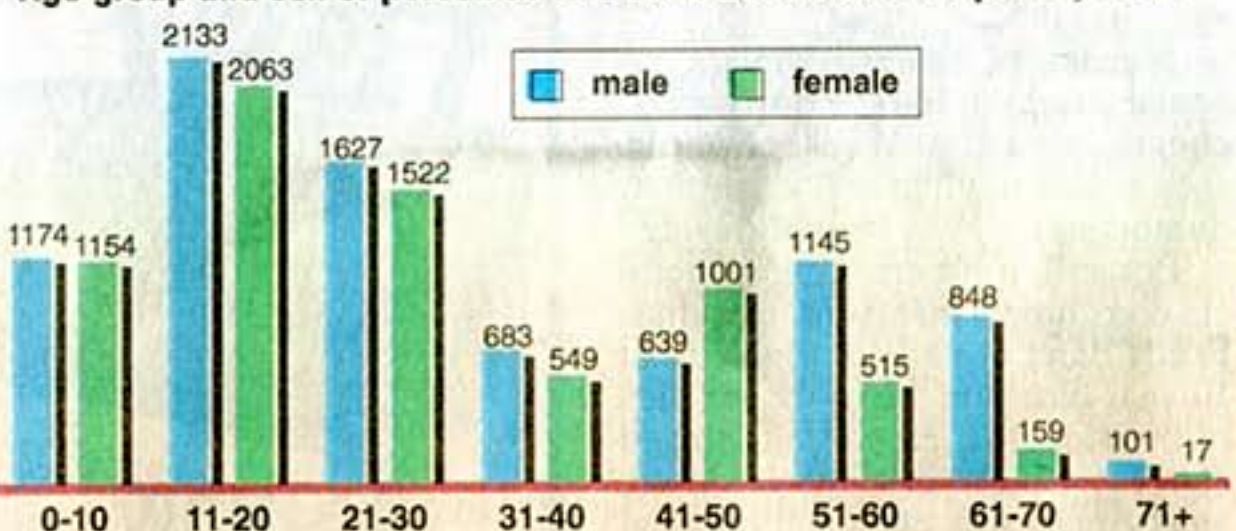


Four-family building

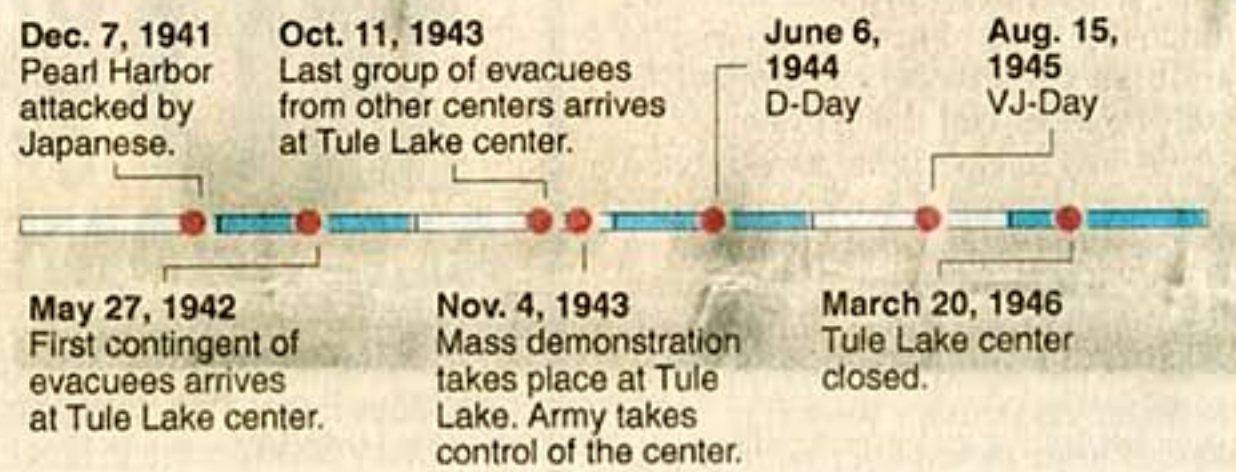
Typical Block Plan



Age group and sex of person at Tule Lake Center as of Sept. 18, 1942



Chronology of events



Source: Takasumi Kojima, Bancroft Library, UC-Berkeley

SEAN McDONALD/Times

is divided by what went on there and the stigma of disloyalty attached to those who stayed after the camp was designated for the disloyal.

"If you stayed, you were associated with being 'no, no,'" Tsuchitani said. No to conscription, no to denouncing Japan.

"I wanted to get beyond what would appear on the surface... and get to the complexity of the human life there," he said.

"A lot of things were coming together at once."

Tsuchitani accompanied his mother on the pilgrimage last August. "Mom had never been back," he said. His father didn't go.

Wrung out from weeks of production, an emotionally combative trip and grueling eight-hour bus ride, Tsuchitani was exhausted when his dad met him at the bus

depot.

"I watched it twice... I want 12 copies," Tsuchitani recalls his father saying.

From father to son, from a nisei who had been there to a sansei now committed to recording the history, it was an important moment.

"He liked it," Tsuchitani said.

They finished dinner and rolled the tape, watching it, for the first time together.

"So we must remember and tell it.

We must acknowledge and tell it."

— from "Meeting at Tule Lake," by Hiroshi Kashiwagi.

The video for "Meeting at Tule Lake" is available from the Tule Lake Committee, Box 17041, San Francisco, CA 94117. The video is \$27, plus \$3 postage.