

Topaz

By Karen L. Ishizuka

This essay is a revised excerpt from "The Home Movie and the National Film Registry: The Story of Topaz," by Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann in "Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories" (Ishizuka and Zimmermann, eds., University of California Press, 2008).

Called "the biggest surprise" of that year's list by "The Hollywood Reporter," 8mm home movies surreptitiously taken in what has come to be known as America's concentration camps during World War II were inducted into the National Film Registry in 1996. Filmed by one of the 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry detained, "Topaz" is not only an amateur compilation but was the first film on the Registry to emanate from the grassroots of any American ethnic community much less an American concentration camp. Antithetical to the emphasis on Hollywood narratives that are capital-intensive and massively marketed, it strengthens the virtue of the National Film Registry to truly reflect America's film heritage as not only entertaining but ultimately cultural and historical.

The home movie footage was taken by Dave Tatsuno between 1943 and 1945 when he was incarcerated in a camp called Topaz in Millard County, Utah - one of ten camps located in seven states from California to Arkansas. Although the United States was at war with Germany and Italy as well as Japan, only the Japanese - two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens by birth - were incarcerated en masse.

For Japanese Americans during World War II, cameras were considered contraband and to be relinquished to authorities. But, being one of the first to pick up a home movie camera in 1936, Tatsuno gave his 8mm movie camera to a friend instead because, as he said, you can't turn in something you don't have. In Topaz, Tatsuno discovered that the Caucasian supervisor of the camp co-op where he worked was also a home movie enthusiast. They arranged for Tatsuno's camera to be mailed to the supervisor because all packages to inmates were opened and inspected. The supervisor gave the camera to Tatsuno with the warning to be careful. "I wouldn't get too close to the [barbed wire] fence," he cautioned.

So Dave filmed his wife showing off their new-born



Frame enlargement from 8mm footage shot by Dave Tatsuno of his father and son during one of the many snowstorms Topaz internees experienced. Courtesy Karen L. Ishizuka.

daughter, friends chatting after a church service, his father and son trudging through the snow, girls trying to escape the dust storm, a lone teenager ice skating on a makeshift ice rink - details of daily living that showed the persistence of community under conditions of questionable incarceration. Rather than presenting the spectacle of illegal incarceration and deprivation of freedom, these everyday images instead remind us that we must unrelentingly find the contradictions of history in each image.

Because Tatsuno worked for the camp co-op, he was able to purchase film stock when he was allowed out of camp on buying trips. To get the shot films processed, he arranged to have the rolls mailed from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. After processing, they would be sent to his brother, who was a student at the University of Utah, who would then give the footage to someone coming into camp.

In the web of racialized war hysteria, civil rights violations and illegal incarceration, the prohibition on image-making added to the silencing of an entire ethnic group. In this context, Tatsuno's footage is especially poignant and historically significant because the very act of shooting in the camps defied this government-sanctioned embargo and gave voice and image to the silenced and the absent. In 1990, Tatsuno wrote about his films:

When viewing these home-movies, there are several things to keep in mind: 1) These films were taken secretly. Since I was afraid to

take many shots in fear of being discovered, you will not see scenes of the guards and sentry at the gate, the barbed wire fences, sentry watchtowers, etc. 2) These films are in color. They tend to make the scene more colorful than the bleak, dusty and arid wasteland it actually was. 3) These are home-movies. As I was merely a hobbyist who enjoyed taking home-movies, these films were taken without the intent of being documentaries. As a result, I focused on family and friends. ...The camera shots, thus, do not fathom the emotions hidden within the evacuees - the fear, the loneliness, the despair and the bitterness that we felt.

In these ways, "Topaz" provides an antidote to the glorification of World War II as the last great, honorable war fought on distant shores. Against the monumentalism of Hollywood's big budgeted projections, "Topaz" functions as a reminder that World War II was fought not just in Europe and Asia but right here at home. In contrast to the other documentaries and feature films about World War II on the National Film Registry, "Topaz" is the only work to graph the racialization of the war as enacted within our own borders. "Topaz" maps the war, often visualized in melodramatic display, and the Japanese American incarceration, often figured within a trope of victimization, as a process of continual negotiation with state power, community, resistance, and agency. In contrast to the propaganda films produced by the U.S. government to justify the concentration camps, the Topaz

footage "speaks" from the point of view of the Japanese Americans in the camps. If anything, the quotidian images of *Topaz* not only provide visual evidence of something that was previously thought to be invisible and lost, they constitute an actual record of historical agency in the face of victimization. By including "Topaz," the National Film Registry acknowledged not only the diversity of film practices, but that the national film heritage includes film as historical evidence as well as artistic contribution.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

*Karen L. Ishizuka is an author, former film writer and producer, and champion of home movies having first brought their historical and cultural significance to the attention of the National Film Registry in 1996. She wrote and produced *Something Strong Within* (1995), an award-winning documentary film featuring home movies from WWII camps for Japanese Americans. In addition to "Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories," she has written on home movies for "International Documentary" (1997), the "Journal of Film Preservation" (1996) and anthologies "La Casa Abierta: El Cine Doméstico y Sus Reciclajes Contemporáneos" (Madrid 2010) and "Common Ground: The Japanese American National Museum and The Culture of Museum Collaborations" (U. Press of Colorado, 2004). She has also written extensively on the WWII camps. Her latest book is "Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties" (Verso Press, 2016).*