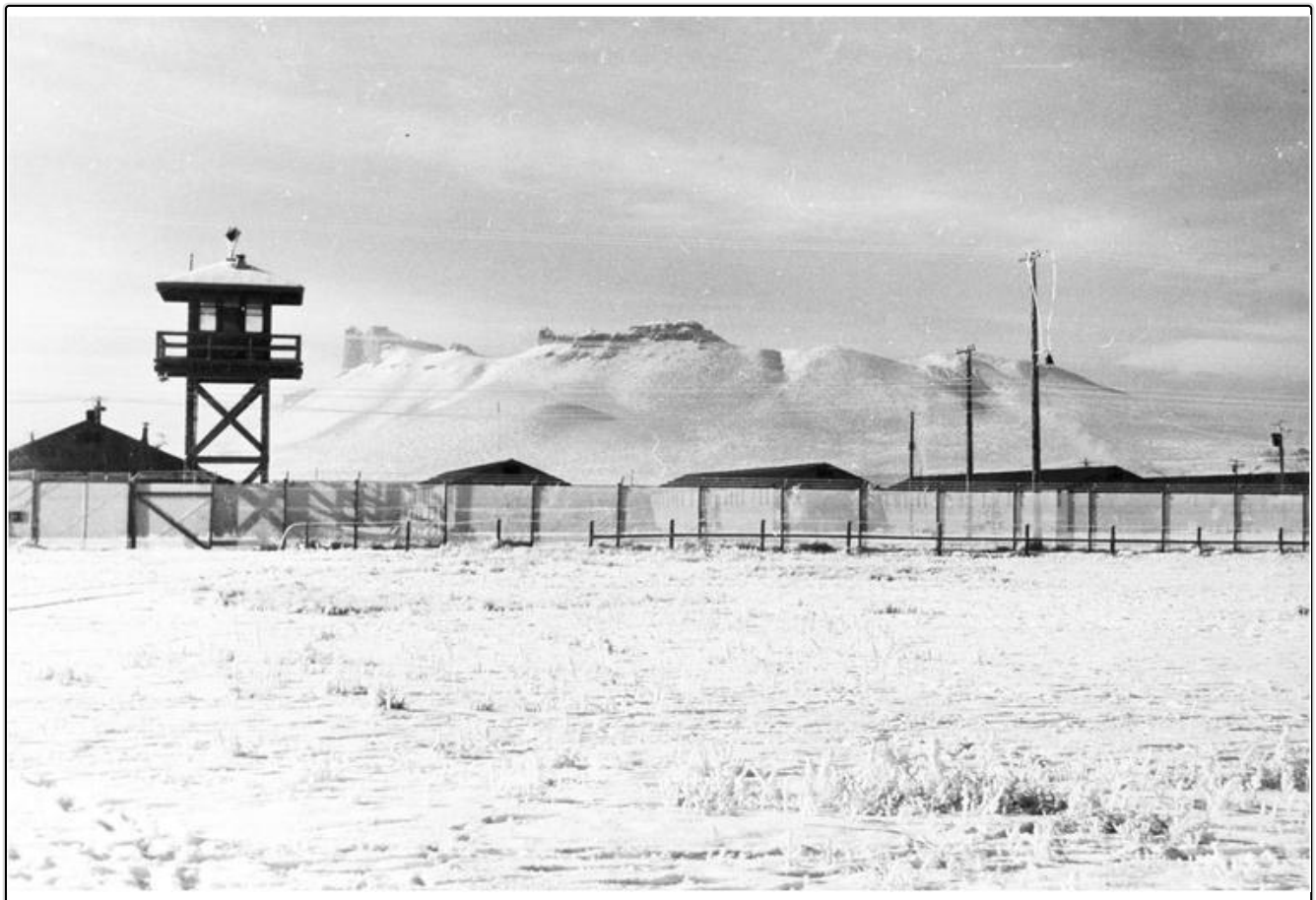
The Tule Lake Jail: A Story of Restoration and Redemption

by Jane Braxton Little

A critical appreciation

When he was twenty-one years old, Jimi Yamaichi built a jail within a jail on the barren wind-swept grasslands near Tule Lake, California. Yamaichi was imprisoned in a Japanese American internment camp. Eager to work despite the cold and miserable conditions, he accepted the job of foreman on the construction project, overseeing his fellow internees at Tule Lake War Relocation Center for $19 a month. His labor contract was for “in-house construction,” he says with a wry chuckle.

The jail still stands, a modest single story half the size of a professional basketball court. Its six cells, designed to hold twenty-four prisoners, were packed with more than a hundred by late 1944, when America’s war with Japan was raging. By the end of 1945, it was empty. Today, the shifting skies that overshadow this spare and lonesome land seem to swallow the jail’s graying walls. Weeds blow against its exterior, where the old concrete is crumbling beneath a leaky flat roof.



Tule Lake perimeter fence and guard tower. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

Yamaichi is aging, too. Now ninety-two, his slender frame remains sturdy. His stride is steady, but slow. He parts his thinning gray hair on the left, carefully combed around large ears that hold tiny hearing aids. His warm brown eyes shine below bushy eyebrows from a pale brown face marked with age spots. Yamaichi speaks with a voice that retains a musical lilt thickened with time. When he smiles, it is with an aching sweetness that belies his past.

Builder and building are bound together in a wrenching chapter of American history: the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Yamaichi has dedicated what remains of his life to ensuring that this story is not forgotten. He is leading a campaign to restore the Tule Lake jail, proudly telling his own story of imprisonment, humiliation, and shame. It is part national history, part personal tragedy. Telling and retelling it is an act of redemption for Yamaichi and the nearly 19,000 others who were held at what many now call the Tule Lake concentration camp. For Yamaichi, preserving the jail as a symbol of racial injustice is an important step in ensuring that these wrongs are never repeated.

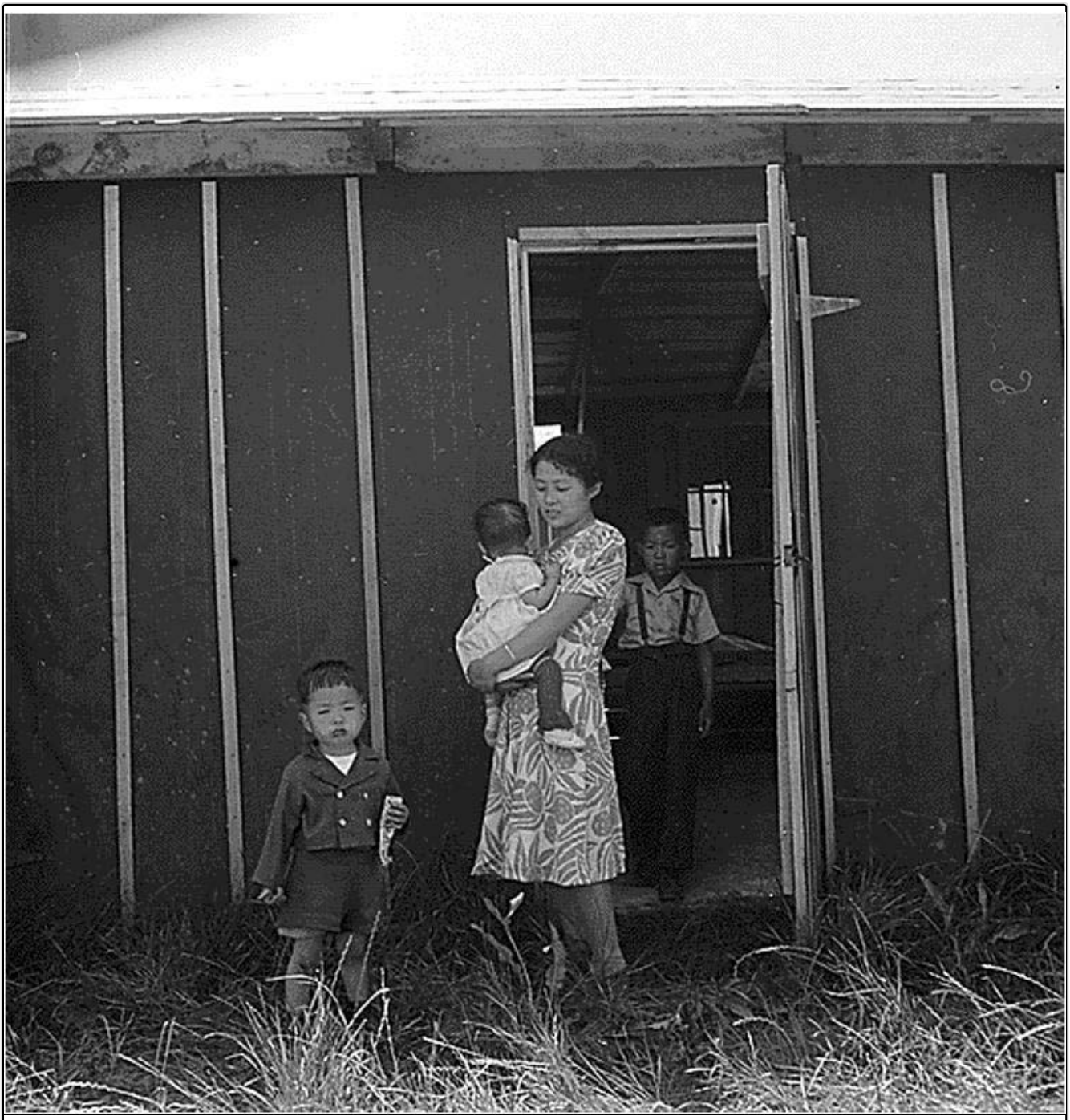
The National Park Service, which owns Tule Lake Jail, is coordinating its $1.2 million restoration with the Tule Lake Committee, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the site and its history. The plans call for fully renovating two of the six cells to their 1945 condition and turning others into an exhibit hall. So far only $200,000 has been raised, but construction is on track to start next year. “I might make it,” says Yamaichi, grinning broadly.

Yamaichi greets me on a bright winter day under a canopy of towering camphor trees outside the Japanese American Museum of San Jose. Inside, he leads me past black-and-white photo displays of the

Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. At the back of the building, he throws open the door to a sparsely furnished twenty-by-twenty-foot room. The wood-planked floor creaks as Yamaichi walks across it and takes a seat on a crude wooden stool beside a metal-framed Army cot. “This is how we lived,” he says, spreading his large hands and inviting me to take in the replica of the barracks he built decades after he left Tule Lake.

When World War II began, Yamaichi was twenty, living with his family on a vegetable farm near San Jose where they grew beans, cucumbers, and squash. The fourth of ten children, he had already developed carpentry skills and was looking forward to studying engineering and architecture at Miami University in Ohio. Instead, he and his family were yanked from their home, rounded up with other Japanese Americans, and sent to Tule Lake Internment Center, one of ten war relocation centers across the United States.

The Tule Lake center is just south of the Oregon border in a dry lakebed west of the lava beds where, in 1873, the Modoc Indians routed a US Army battalion before surrendering to troops that outnumbered them twelve to one. Like all of the Japanese-American relocation centers, it is isolated and inhospitable. Eight-foot barbed wire fences surrounded the compound that held 18,789 people at its peak, with guard towers at every corner. “If you crossed out, they would shoot you,” Yamaichi says.



Photograph of a mother and children outside internment camp barracks by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

His family was assigned to a hastily built wooden barracks sided with tarpaper. Yamaichi looks around the museum replica, staring at the wide chinks in the floor. “That dust would crawl up like ants through those cracks,” he says. Bits of rust-colored lava rock would work its way through the newspapers his mother stuffed between the wallboards against the relentless wind. Their furnishings were illuminated by a single bare bulb like the one that dangles above us. Hanging nearby is a clothesline strung between walls and draped with a sheet. “That was all the privacy we had,” Yamaichi says. He fingers the thin, wool Army blanket on the bed nearby, a patchwork of remnants from World War I military uniforms. “This was all the warmth.”

Yamaichi was more fortunate than many of the Tule Lake internees. “I was 20-years-old, feeling my oats. Bachelor guys like me, we were happy-go-lucky.” As a carpenter, he had skills the government guards

needed. He got a job with the construction and maintenance department. “I enjoyed it. I did my work and just kept quiet,” he says.

Not everybody did. Unrest over living and working conditions was common throughout the internment camps, but it was an ambiguous, clumsily worded government questionnaire sent to all ten centers early in 1943 that turned Tule Lake into a crucible for Japanese-American resistance. Designed to determine the loyalty of Japanese Americans, the questions led to sharp disagreements among the inmates and agonizing turmoil within families. The first asked prisoners if they were willing to serve the United States in combat duty, and then, if they would “foreswear any allegiance to the Japanese emperor.” The questions were insulting and confusing for both Japanese citizens living in the United States who had been productive and cooperative members of American society and American citizens who were being denied their constitutional rights in prison camps. Twelve thousand inmates gave negative or qualified answers.

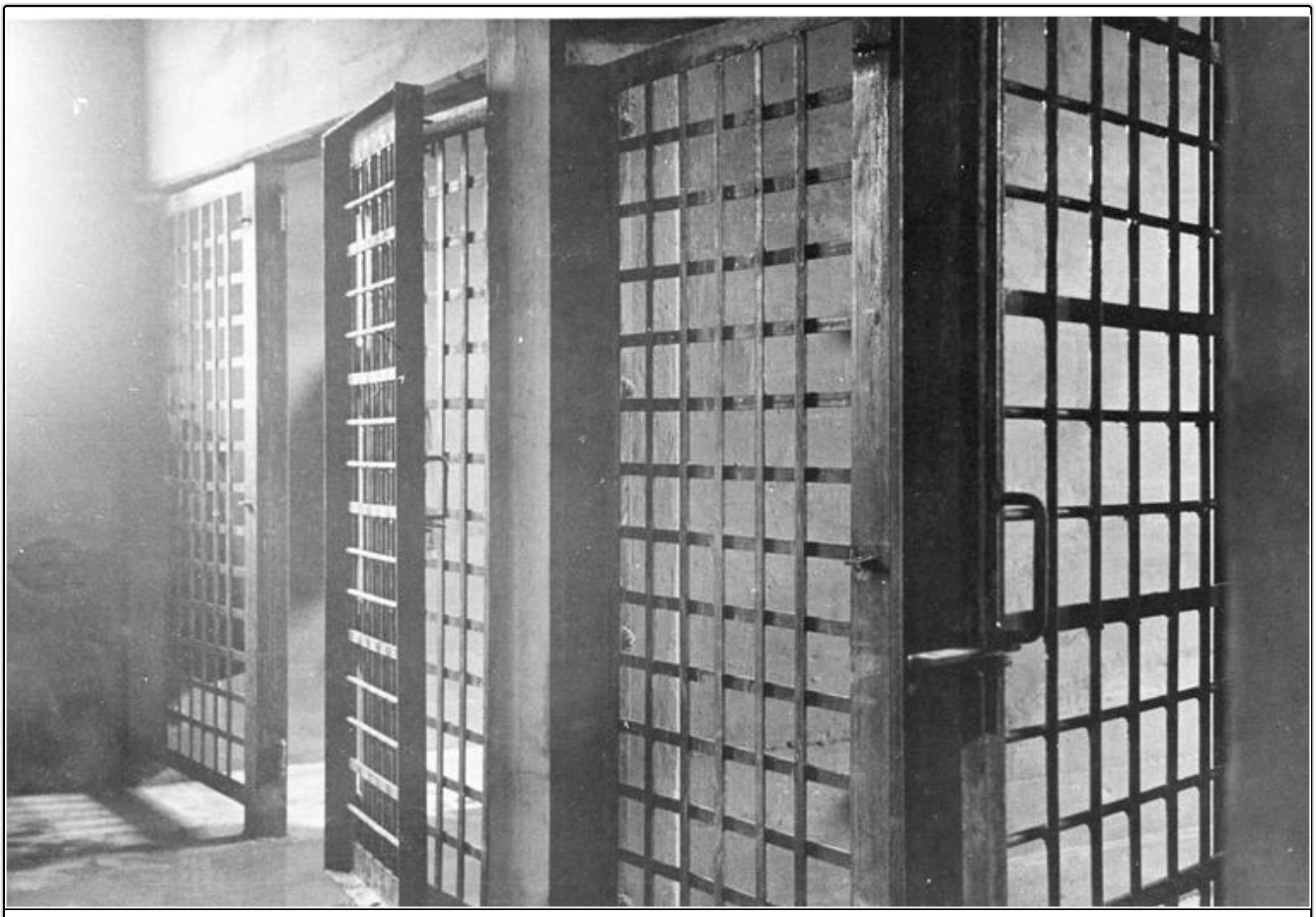
At Tule Lake, 42 percent of prisoners answered no to one or both of the questions. Because it had the highest number of dissenters by far, Tule Lake was designated to house dissidents from the other nine camps. They became known as “no-no boys,” and the camp was repurposed as an armed camp and segregation center with twenty-eight guard towers, a prisoner curfew, and barracks-to-barracks searches that all but eclipsed normal daily activities. Overcrowding taxed the simple infrastructures Yamaichi helped build. “We ran out of water, and sewers were running wild,” he says. Government officials declared martial law, which led to months of even greater repression and hardship.

Tule Lake jail interior in 2006. Courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey.

The atmosphere was poisonous, says Will Kaku, a Sansei (a third-generation Japanese American) whose father was among the Tule Lake "no-no boys." Tanks rolled into the camp; inmates were assaulted with tear gas and beaten by guards with baseball bats. The animosity was not just between inmates and guards. Even though all of them were equally imprisoned without constitutional rights, fierce disagreements raged among the Japanese Americans who identified as "loyals" and those who refused to say "yes" to the loyalty questions. "What is patriotism under such circumstances? What is loyalty?" Kaku asks.

As discontent grew, Army officials ramped up physical controls, designating an area as a stockade surrounded by fences and gun towers. Along with barracks, a mess hall, and a latrine, they provided unheated tents, using them as punishment for some prisoners.

Then there was the jail. "I didn't have to build it," says Yamaichi. The project manager gave him a choice. "He said, 'If you don't do it, I'll get somebody else to.'" Amid the turmoil roiling throughout the camp, it was not easy to recruit workers to build a jail for themselves. "They called me *baka*—crazy." Yamaichi eventually signed up forty people, most of them farmers honing new skills with makeshift tools. They pretentiously anointed themselves *Daiku-san,* master carpenters. "We knew it was phony, but it helped," says Yamaichi, and they built a jail to hold their fellow prisoners.



Tule Lake stockade. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

Soon it was overcrowded with the opinionated and the dissenting—"Anyone they thought was a troublemaker," says Yamaichi. Among the prisoners were "disloyals," whose experience had so shaken their faith in America that they opted to renounce their citizenship and go to Japan. While awaiting his deportation to a country where he likely had never lived, one desperate man scratched a plaintive message in Japanese that has haunted Yamaichi for seventy years: "Show me the way to go home."

Tule Lake was the last internment camp to close, and Yamaichi was the last inmate to leave it. He was given a raise—to 35 cents an hour—and hired to inventory all the buildings after the other prisoners left. His primary task was to make sure no dead bodies were left behind. He didn't find any.

On 31 May 1946, four years after he and his family left home, Yamaichi boarded a train and rejoined his family on their San Jose farm. He didn't want to farm and soon moved to Los Angeles, where he earned a contractor's license, and met and married Eiko Tanaka. Yamaichi started a contracting business specializing in residential and commercial buildings, and for the next four decades he made a living to provide for his family. Like most former internees, he was rebuilding his life in an environment still sometimes hostile to Japanese Americans. Also, like most, he didn't talk about the indignities of camp life or his indignation over losing his rights as an American citizen. "You just keep struggling," he says with a wan smile.

"I found that infuriating," says Tom Izu, a fifty-six-year-old third-generation Sansei who is executive director of De Anza College's California History Center. "Something significant happened to them, and they had no way to talk about it."

While Yamaichi and other second-generation Nisei were getting on with their lives, their children were growing up in the caldron of the Civil Rights Movement and the rebellious 1960s. It was in classrooms, not living rooms, that they learned about the humiliation and degradation their families endured in internment camps. When they tried to talk to their parents, however, they were often met with stony-faced silence.

Tom Izu joined the student and community activists who, along with a handful of former inmates, were pushing for redress for the injustice of Japanese-American incarceration. In 1974, they organized the first of what would become biannual pilgrimages to Tule Lake to educate the larger community and provide a way for generations of Japanese Americans to come together to discuss their shared history. A combination of grassroots agitating and political lobbying led to the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, under which Izu and other campaigners won an official apology to survivors from the United States government. Each received $20,000 as token reparation.

Like many of his generation, Yamaichi was uncomfortable with the redress movement. He was making his way as a contractor in a "white" world and risked losing his clients by speaking out. "Oh sure, I took the $20,000 but I wouldn't fight for it," he says. He maintained his silence. But he was curious about the biannual pilgrimages to Tule Lake, which were attracting participants and former prisoners from all ten internment camps. In 1991, he and his wife decided to join "to see what it was all about."

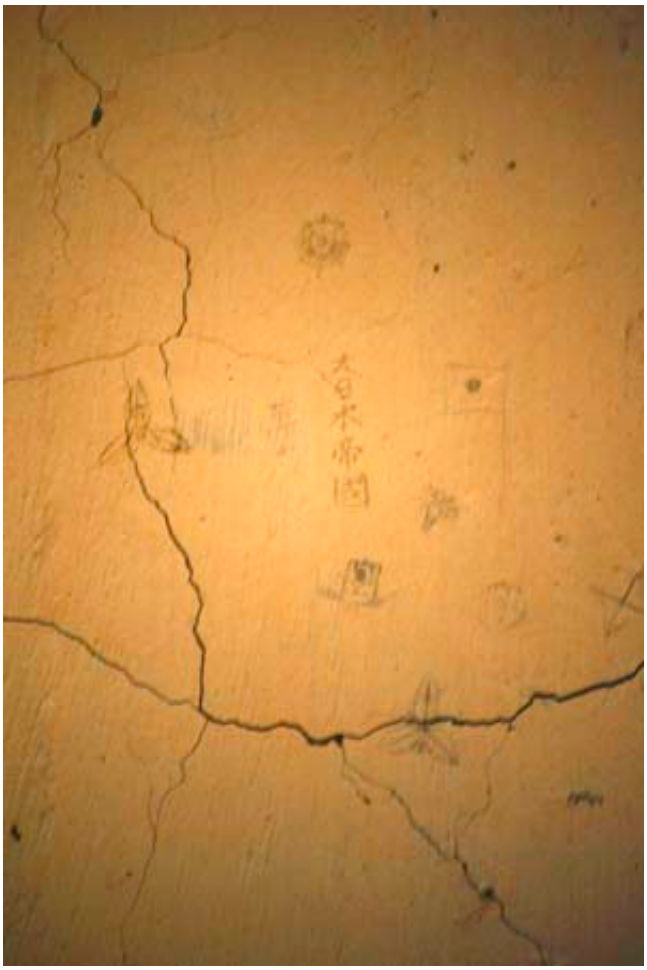
Yamaichi recalls the moment he set foot on the dusty ground where he had endured so much hardship. Twenty-four years later, sitting in the replica barracks in San Jose, his eyes fill with tears. "I can't explain it—the feeling you get standing on the very ground you walked on for four years as a prisoner." Seeing the jail—"all that old graffiti and those bars"—spawned an idea: Yamaichi would redeem his past by restoring the jail. He would heal himself by telling his story. "And that's when I decided. I should come back—to tell what happened to me," he says.

The Tule Lake pilgrimage transformed Yamaichi, says Izu. "Suddenly Jimi was doing all sorts of stuff—building guard tower replicas, digging up all kinds of relics he somehow got hold of." Yamaichi joined the Tule Lake Committee and jumped in to support its mission to increase understanding of the imprisonments, especially Tule Lake's unique role. He joined other members in speaking publicly to school and civic groups about the internment camp experience. After 9/11, Japanese Americans stood side-by-side with Muslim Americans at many events, telling their own story of discrimination to ensure that these

injustices were not repeated.

The Tule Lake Committee focused on preserving the internment camp, and in 2006 it was named a national historic landmark. Two years later, the site was designated a national monument. That set the stage for a campaign to restore the jail. National Park Service officials consider it the most significant structure remaining from any of the internment camps.

For Hiroshi Shimizu, president of the Tule Lake Committee, the jail is a symbol of the government's vindictive treatment of nonviolent dissenters who resisted their unconstitutional imprisonment. The government should be responsible for funding the restoration, he says, but the committee has kick-started the process. They are halfway to their goal of $500,000. The process is moving quickly for a federal bureaucracy—but not fast enough for Yamaichi. "I'm doing the best I can to move it along a little faster," he says. "I don't have that much time."



Graffiti in Tule Lake jail: "Down with America" (datou beikoku). Courtesy Historic American Buildings Survey.

Jimi Yamaichi in the replica of the Tule Lake barracks he built at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose.Photograph by Jane Braxton Little.

He has been so intent on telling me his story that he has forgotten about his uncomfortable perch on the crude barracks stool, surrounded by the trappings of his four-year confinement. Yamaichi squirms slightly, rises stiffly, and beams the shy smile that has charmed audiences from junior high school students to government officials. The stories he tells orbit in broad arcs that always circle back to the jail, “the monument I built for my own people.” The building that has haunted him is now keeping him alive.

As we leave the museum barracks, Yamaichi wanders up to a fit-looking young man studying a photo display of Japanese American athletes. He starts a casual conversation. “So you were born in Hong Kong,” Yamaichi says, with warmth and genuine interest. “Let me show you the baseball team we had at Tule Lake.” Soon they are in animated discussion, strolling through the exhibit area into the barracks room, and Yamaichi launches into his story for a brand new audience.

Note

Image at top: Tule Lake internment camp barracks in winter, with Castle Rocks in background. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

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