Cherry trees are campus legacy

The Japanese cherry trees blossomed again this May as they have every year since 1942. Of the original 20 trees planted by Japanese students before they left college that spring, only a few remain, growing near Lawrence St. In front of the girls’ dormitories.

There were 14 Japanese students attending CPS the year America went to war. A few, like Wada Oyanagi whose recollections are printed here, were Issei or first generation—most, however, were American born nisei. For all of them, December 7 was a traumatic turning point in their lives.

Along with all CPS students, they had assembled in Jones Hall auditorium to listen to the day after Pearl Harbor to Roosevelt’s declaration of war, knowing their lives would never be the same.

Like all the 110,000 West Coast residents of Japanese origin, whether citizens or not, they spent part of the war years in “relocation” camps. Their imprisonment the result of Executive Order No. 9066, issued on February 19, 1942.

Those who came from Seattle or the Puyallup Valley were soon sent to hastily prepared buildings at the Puyallup Fair Grounds. Shigeo Sugasawa, a sophomore Ycitifiye Jinguji (now Mrs. Hoshiko), who lived in Tacoma, attended classes until May. Because of the coast, however, she was forced to drop an evening class with Dr. Tomramita, and the group had to get special permission from authorities to join a picnic at Point Defiance. Throughout the spring they and their families waited for officials to determine their fate.

Finally word came. The Tacoma families were to be “evacuated” to Pinetada Assembly Center, near Fresno, California. Just before their departure, the remaining Japanese students attending CPS planted the cherry trees, a reminder of happier days on campus.

Senior Dorothy Yoshiko Fujimoto, now married to Dr. William Sugiyama and living at Fort Dix, New Jersey, was in charge of the brief, poignant ceremony, attended by fellow students and faculty. Dean John Regus, they recall, was particularly sympathetic with their plight and later visited them in camp in California. (Dr. R. Franklin Thompson, who succeeded Dr. Todd as president in the summer of 1942, was able to intercede for some of them and arrange their college transfers.)

Jack Hata, who now lives in Northridge, California, recalls the train trip. May 17, evacuation day, was his 21st birthday. “What a way to celebrate! I also remember the very first day in camp, being in line waiting to get into the mess hall in 100 degree heat. I had the strong feeling I would never leave that camp alive. Thoughts of death, I never thought of for someone—”

But he and the others did leave. Now he is a Camp. Most went to the Puyallup fair grounds temporarily before being sent to Heart Mountain Camp in Wyoming. Mrs. Hoshiko, who practised at the camp and worked at a Wyoming high school, while her brother was released to study at Hamline University in St. Paul. She later worked for the Tenri company in St. Paul until her return—through her work with the Japanese American Citizens Committee.

For Wada Oyanagi, ex-’43, there was a career in the Methodist ministry. His younger brother, Kenji Oyanagi, who graduated from Hamline, is now a principia in St. Paul, while Shigeo Wakamatsu, president of the campus group, became a doctor in Chicago. Masayoshi Jinguji, another Hamline graduate, now works for St. Regis and lives in Fairbanks. Mine Tsuchioka lives in Minneapolis, and Margaret Yamamoto lives in Idaho.

The whereabouts of others of the group—Aiko Kimura (Mrs. H. Tsuchioka), Tom Goto, Jimmy Yoshijima, Hide Sato, and Jimmy Yamamoto—are not known.

Undoubtedly 1942 was a difficult year for all students then on campus. The basketball team, which had lost two players by accidental death, cancelled a planned trip to Central America. Seniors like student body president Jim Paulson were concerned about which branch of service to join. But, certainly the fate of the 14 Japanese-Americans was difficult for all CPS students to understand. “They were our friends,” recalls Ruth Todd Rockwood, ASB secretary. “We found their internment hard to accept.” And so, in retrospect, do we all.

After 34 years, however, the 14 Japanese-Americans have been able to forget— or hide—any bitterness about their wartime treatment. Occasionally they have returned to campus to see the surviving cherry trees—their legacy of friendship for today’s students, many of whom are also Asian-Americans.