REFLECTION

Born in the Year of the Ox

Setting aside a difficult time and enjoying, to the fullest, being Canadian senior citizens

By SUE KAI

Sue and Sam on their wedding day in 1948. Photos courtesy: More of Our Canada

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In 1990, more than 20 years ago, we became senior citizens. At the ripe old age of 65, most of us had retired and started to receive our old-age pension and various senior discounts.

Flash back to 1942, 70 years ago, when 22,000 Japanese-Canadians were forcibly removed from their homes along the Pacific Coast of British Columbia, due to the War Measures Act. Families like mine were separated; women and children were sent to internment camps in the interior of British Columbia, others to sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba, men to camps in northern British Columbia and Ontario, and so on. It was a period of utter chaos and upheaval when our lives were uprooted.

Since that ordeal, Japanese-Canadians have settled in various cities and towns across Canada, mainly in the Toronto and Vancouver areas, and live comfortable lives. I have lived in Toronto since 1946. I was married in 1948 to Sam Kai and we have two sons and five grandchildren.

Back to 1990: A group of friends in Toronto came up with the idea of having a get-together for those born in 1925. In other words, everyone was 65 years old, or would soon be 65—firsttime senior citizens.

Under the leadership of Kay Fujiwara, assisted by George Tsushima, our initial get-together was held at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto on July 15, 1990. The reunion was named Ushi-Doshi Birthday Bash. Ushi-Doshi in Japanese means people born in the Year of the Ox, according to the lunar calendar. Those born in the Year of the Ox could also have been born in the years

The Ushi-Doshi gang performing a skit in 1990.

1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997 and 2009.

Ox people are articulate and eloquent, but speak sparingly unless they are driven to anger. They can be stubborn and are reticent to admit or accept defeat. They are industrious, private and are extremely skilled with handwork. They are physically and mentally alert. The third and last phase of Ox people's lives will be the best…if they live long enough to experience it.

The first Ushi-Doshi Birthday Bash attracted 76 people age 65, plus family and friends. A lively group, many who were grandparents, took over the stage with renditions of tap dancing, karaoke singing, mimicry, skits and Japanese Odori dancing in full costume.

The people attending were Canadians of Japanese descent who had been 16 or 17 years old at the time of evacuation during the Second World War. For some of us, it was the first time in a long time seeing old friends. Some came from as far away as British Columbia and the United States. It was a bittersweet reunion, full of nostalgia and good and sad memories.

Since then, every five years we've had another reunion in Toronto, which brings us to five so far, organized by a committee headed by Kay Fujiwara and Ruby Fukumoto. A group picture was taken at each reunion. Attendance has decreased over the years, but the Ushi-Doshi gang is still quite active.

We will be celebrating our 90th birthdays in the year 2015, only three years away to becoming nonagenarians.

I am one of the Ushi-Doshi survivors. We're only 87 years young, still time to enjoy our Canada.

The second Ushi-Doshi Birthday Bash in 1995; Sue is in the first row, second from left, wearing a white blazer over a blue dress.

ESSAY

Parallel Wars: Japanese American and Japanese Canadian Internment Films Part 1

By GREG ROBINSON

This paper examines films that portray the removal and confinement of ethnic Japanese in North America during World War II (often, if imprecisely, called the Japanese internment) through the interactions between Japanese families and white characters, in order to reflect on the ways in which these films are shaped by dominant narratives about race relations. Let me take a moment to explain what I mean about dominant narratives. One eternal dilemma surrounding so-called "message films"; that is, films that deal with social problems and in particular with minorities, is how to get white audiences, who may share endemic prejudices, to identify with characters facing injustice because of their racial or ethnic difference.

During the classic Hollywood studio era, this most often involved variations on the "passing" narrative, in which a Black person passed for white. In films from Imitation of Life (1934, 1957) to Pinky (1949) to the different remakes of Show Boat (1936, 1951), scripts dramatized the difference in treatment that the same white-appearing person—female in all the above cases—received when crossing the "color line."1 In time, different variations on this narrative emerged. Sometimes, as in Gentleman's Agreement (1947) or Black Like Me (1964) the main character himself, a white man, passes in reverse, posing as the ethnic/racial other; or, as in Lost Boundaries (1949), they learn of their racial difference after being unaware of it. Although "passing" narratives had historic roots in African American literature, they became discredited and largely vanished by the 1970s.2 In the wake of the Black Power movement, scholars such as Thomas Cripps and Donald Bogle complained that these representations perpetuated images of minorities as "other," rather than valorizing their actual subjectivity—in essence, the audience is made to feel bad, not about the treatment of Blacks, but that white people should be subjected to such treatment.3

The elimination of this theme did not necessarily signal a focus on minority protagonists, but rather the expansion in antiracist films using an existing but less frequent theme: the white hero. His presence—for it is most frequently an individual man—is designed to give the white audience an accessible character with whom they can identify, and through whose eyes they can grasp the nature of the injustice to the "other" and perhaps change their own views. This character can take different forms. One, which undergirds such diverse works as the Japanese American war film Go For Broke (1951) and The Defiant Ones (1958), is the white man who begins by sharing widespread prejudices and learns through his contact with the "other" to overcome them. The other is the white man who is already antiracist, but who must befriend and help the "other" despite the threat to himself—the classic model being Gregory Peck's Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), a lawyer who defends a Black man charged with rape in 1930s Alabama despite pressure form the community not to. In either case, the focus is on the white man and his actions, rather than on the victims of prejudice.

This theme became especially popular during the 1980s, a period that saw several successful films that used variations on it. (for reasons we can debate but do not have time to deal with at present). In Richard Attenborough's Cry Freedom, set in 1970s South Africa, Kevin Kline's Donald Woods displaced Denzel Washington's Stephen Biko, the ostensible subject of the film, at the moral center of action. In Kevin Costner's Dances With Wolves, a white man (played by Costner) is accepted as one of the Sioux nation and is distressed by the savagery of whites in the West in the 1860s. The most controversial of the white hero films was Alan Parker's Mississippi Burning, which dramatized in semi-fictionalized form the 1964 Freedom Summer, the church burnings and the killings of the civil rights activists Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman. However, rather than centering on black activists in danger, Parker fixes on a white Southern FBI agent, played by Gene Hackman, who uses his skills to identify the murderers. Parker was the target of widespread criticism by scholars and movement survivors for portraying the FBI, an agency largely hostile to civil rights (and engaged in wiretapping Martin Luther King, Jr), as heroic. Despite concerns about historical license and distortion, these films were successful at the box office and spawned copies. Denzel Washington even did a role reversal from Cry Freedom. In Philadelphia (1993) he plays a version of the "white hero" in the form of a Black lawyer who overcomes his own homophobia to take the case of a man suing the firm that fired him for being Gay.4

This being the case, it was perhaps inevitable that the two mainstream Hollywood narratives about Japanese American removal would be shaped by this theme. The first was Come See The Paradise(1990), directed by Alan Parker, who had previously made Mississippi Burning. Here again, the film revolves around a white man (played by Dennis Quaid), a labor organizer whose Nisei wife and mixed-race children are taken away from him because of their race, and who attempts to save them. Compared to the story of a mythical white man—and, to a much lesser extent, his Nisei wife—most Japanese American characters are not developed. Their collective experience is marginalized as backdrop to the (implicitly more important) story of the white hero. To this injury is added the insult of historical inaccuracy—for in reality ethnic Japanese wives of white men and their mixed-race children were officially exempted from removal, unlike ethnic Japanese husbands of white wives (such as Communist activist Karl Yoneda, the real-life prototype of Parker's protagonist) who were put into camp. The other film, Scott Hicks's 1999 Snow Falling on Cedars, dramatizes the trial of a small-town Nisei man unjustly accused of murder. He is allowed to demonstrate some rage and complexity of character. However, he is saved by the timely intervention of a white man, played by Ethan Hawke, who was once the sweetheart of his wife. It is Hawke's character that is the only fully realized one—he sees the injustice, but must grow past his own bitterness to offer his assistance (a coming of age in that it is equally an act of letting go the hope of renewal with his ex-lover). In a scene directly inspired by To Kill a Mockingbird, the town's Japanese community, seated in the balcony of the courtroom, pays homage by bowing to their white champion.

Stay tuned for part 2 in the February 2013 issue.