

*Jerry Omori: The Life of an Uninterned Japanese  
American*

The morning of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, was much like any other for the Omori family. The sun's first light hit the mountain near their home. It cast a dark shadow upon the vast expanse of coffee farms below. Already farm hands were out picking what remained of the season's coffee crop. It had been a good season. Earlier that autumn eleven year old Jerry Omori had picked hundreds of sacks full of coffee beans from his father's farm, but now that season was done and school had begun. It was Sunday, a holy day for the Buddhist religion. Jerry and his family and almost all other families in Hawaii were at temple. It had been like many other Sunday mornings, quiet, serene, only the *whoosh* of the farm plants blowing from side to side in the warm breeze. Little did they know that during that same quiet morning nearly 180 miles away, too far to hear or see, Pearl Harbor had been attacked by Japanese aircraft. In little more than minutes, before anyone could react, every US ship in the harbor was gone, either ripped to shreds or sunk deep in the warm Hawaiian waters, oil slipping its way up to the surface. Of these terrible events the people of Kona, Hawaii, would not know for several hours more.

Later that afternoon the Omori family and every other family in Kona, Hawaii, finally learned that the US Naval Base was no more. The Omori family was huddled up next to their radio listening to the evening report, the comedians, music, and then the news that World War II had finally struck home in America. Upon hearing the dastardly news, Jerry's father shook his head.

"No, no, not Japan; it can't be Japan, no." From that moment on every Japanese-American citizen's life was changed.

Born January 20, 1931, Jerry Omori and his family had lived in Kona their whole lives; Jerry's mother and father had been born in Japan, though, and at the time Hawaii wasn't officially a US state. They owned a family coffee farm where Jerry and his siblings had worked every coffee season since they were able to walk, filling bag upon bag of ripe coffee beans. It was the perfect life, a good home, loving family and friends, and, most of all, free coffee and some of the best in the world.

For six weeks after the attack Jerry had no school, an extension to his summer break that had ended two months earlier, he called it. Unlike the Japanese American mainlanders, the Omori's weren't interned, they were put to work. In 1942 the American military stationed itself around Jerry's elementary

school playground. Their ominous green tents surrounded the children constantly. Then one chilly morning only days after their arrival, the military had a job for everyone, even the children. For Jerry, part of attending school was to sit in a tree house watching for any planes. Boys were assigned one half hour each during the school day. If he ever spotted a plane, he was to report the sighting to the principal. Along with the rest of the school, Jerry would run out to the fields to the four-foot high grass shelters made by the students to hide and wait for the "all clear" from their principal. Even now Jerry laughs at how the school thought that grass shelters could protect them from an air raid. For more than thirty minutes, although it felt like hours, the school sat silently inside the shelters until the all clear summons by the principal's instructions.