

THE COURAGE TO FIGHT FOR A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

[Editor's Note: Frank Emi is an iconic figure in the annals of civil rights history. In 1944, he was part of a group of internees at Heart Mountain, Wyoming Relocation



Frank Emi toasting the passage of the Bill in 1988

Center (euphemism for a concentration camp) who rejected the draft on the basis that their rights under the Constitution were being totally violated. To further their dismay, the Japanese American inmates learned that they would also be forced to serve in segregated units of the Army. Emi, although not eligible for the draft himself because he was the father of two small children, was sent to Leavenworth (a federal penitentiary) as a leader of the draft resistance movement.]

Frank Emi: “We resisted because it was all so unbelievable. We were stripped of our fundamental rights and ordered to serve in the armed forces. We could either tuck our tails between our legs like dogs or stand up like free men and fight for justice!. Here we were, uprooted from our homes, thrown into concentration camps in the middle of the Wyoming desert, stripped of our civil rights and classified as enemy aliens! It was unbelievable! To subject us to the draft added insult to injury and was the proverbial straw that broke the camels back. I felt what the government did to us was absolutely wrong and if I had to do it all over again, I would do the same thing!”

[After serving 16 months in prison, Frank Emi was released when the Tenth Circuit Court of appeals reversed his conviction from the decision of the Federal District Court in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Although severely ostracized by some members of the Japanese community, particularly the “super patriotic” leadership of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Frank had the satisfaction of seeing his “conviction” overturned. A pardon was also granted by President Harry Truman in 1947 to all Japanese American men convicted of draft resistance restoring their civil and political rights.]

Frank Emi: “The decision by the Appellate Court reversing our conviction and the full Presidential Pardon by President Truman, proved that we were right! I received a letter from one of the 63 young men from Heart Mountain who was jailed for refusing induction into the draft. While sitting in his jail cell, he wrote,”

“The fact that at last will come our chance for the trial for which we have so fervently hoped and prayed for all these past months is making us feel restless and impatient. But we are eagerly and determinedly awaiting the day, knowing deep within our hearts and minds that no matter how the trial ends, that we are right! Our conscience and our hearts shall be clear, knowing that we have had the courage to fight for a fundamental principle. We may lose the verdict, but the verdict shall be man made and with the passing of time, eternal truth and right will come to light and that is my firm belief!”

[Emi believes that Truman would not have issued a pardon in that postwar climate unless there was grudging acknowledgment of the truth to his, the Fair Play Committee and the other draft resistor’s actions. History has since vindicated their stand. Even the JACL has now acknowledged the importance of his and the other leaders fight’ for civil rights and has publicly apologized to the resisters for the harsh treatment meted out to them by the wartime JACL leaders. Without a doubt, Frank Emi, the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee and all the resisters now occupy a significant place in the history of America’s civil rights struggle!]

Postscript by Frank Emi

In 1982, I had the good fortune to meet some members from NCRR at a slide presentation of the Heart Mountain Relocation Center at Cal State L.A. The presentation was organized by Bacon Sakatani, a former Heart Mountain internee. I was asked to give a brief talk about the Fair Play Committee and the draft resistance movement. After the program, some members of NCRR approached me and said that they were surprised to learn that there was any resistance in the camps and asked me to come to their next meeting and talk about my experiences. After meeting with the group, I was so impressed by their dedication and sincere efforts in their fight for redress and reparations that I felt compelled to join the organization. Their struggle was much like what we faced at Heart Mountain, against all odds, with some leaders in organizations like the JACL, favoring a study commission and community fund, opposing individual monetary reparations in the beginning because they did not want to “make waves.”

The high point of my NCRR experience was our trip to Washington D.C. to lobby the congressman for their support of H.R.442, the redress and reparations bill. The rest is history! I have the utmost respect and admiration for the members of NCRR: for their steadfast stand for civil and human rights, and I am proud and honored to be a member of this organization.