



Video Story Transcript

Sagebrush Santa: Christmas, 1942 in the Minidoka Internment Camp

By: Storyteller Alton Takiyama-Chung
www.altonchung.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUbEogxmz5w>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Alton Takiyama-Chung. A few years ago, I went on a pilgrimage to Minidoka Relocation Center near Hu... Twin Falls, Idaho along with other members of the Japanese-American community from Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. That's an annual event that happens about every June. And it includes a tour of the site as well as side trips to the local attractions and the sharing of memories and personal experiences. I listened to the stories of these people who were children incarcerated in the camp. I asked a lot of questions and did more research. And I wrote this story about what it would be like to be a child far away from home, the first Christmas in a place called Minidoka.

The morning rains had turned the paths and roads into muddy swamps. By evening, the mud was covered over with a blanket of snow that softened the outlines of the towers and the buildings. The snow just glistened and glittered in the moonlight and to five-year-old Kiyoshi, he thought that this was... made the perfect Christmas picture.

In the high desert of southern Idaho, in the winter of 1942, Kiyoshi sat in the wi... Mess Hall of Block 7 squirming with anticipation. His older brother and older sister went off with their friends and his mother, his Okasan, was in the, in the barracks resting 'cause she had been doing laundry all day. But it was Christmas Eve and Santa Claus was coming.

Now, about a year ago, there was an attack in a place called Pearl Harbor. And shortly after that, these men in suits and the, and this big car came and took Kiyoshi's father, his Ootosan, away. That made Kiyoshi and his

whole family very sad. And that's when a cold, empty space opened up in Kiyoshi's stomach. He missed his Otosan; he missed his father, the way that he would tousle his hair and call him Kiyoshi-chan, or little Kiyoshi.

Then came these things called curfew, which made people scurry around after the sun went down. And then there were these things called blackouts in which everything went dark.

But the thing that his mother feared the most was this thing called evacuation. When that came, Kiyoshi's mom and his older brother and older sister, they packed whatever they could in the suitcases. They moved out of their house and into a horse stall at the Exposition Center in the big city of Portland, Oregon. Aw, it was hot and stinky and, aw, just horrible in this horse stall. Kiyoshi couldn't understand why they just couldn't go home. And then came the day when people gave them little pop... paper tags with the same number on it. The whole family had to wear this little paper tag. And they were herded out of the horse stalls and onto a train guarded by these big soldiers with big guns. They went on this train over the mountains where they were herded out of the trains and onto buses. And they're taken to their new home of wood and tarpaper shacks and dust. This's the first time Kiyoshi had ever been on a train. It's the first time he'd ever been out of the state of Oregon. It was also the first time he'd ever seen a barbed wire fence.

When they first arrived in Minidoka, there was no heat in the barracks. They're only cold-water showers. The dust just kinda blew in through cracks around the windows and doors and through the walls. And the outside toilets were freezing cold, and often Kiyoshi would be woken in the middle of the night by the fussing of the baby at the far end unit of the barracks. At least now, they had hot water, and Kiyoshi could make it from the showers to his unit in the barracks without icicles forming in his hair.

As Christmas approached, Kiyoshi began to worry and he asked his Osakan, his mother, "Uh, will Santa be able to get a pass to get through the front gate? Do you think Santa will be able to make it through the small chimney of the stove in our, in our unit? Do you think the guards will shoot the reindeer if they get too close to the fence?"

His mother said that she didn't know but she was pretty sure the guards wouldn't do anything to hurt Santa Claus. And then Tommy, Kiyoshi's best friend who was seven, who knew everything, said, "Ah, no, Santa Claus and reindeer, they're magical! They can go anywhere."

Kiyoshi watched the snowflakes drift past the window outside and got excited all over again. He looked into the mess hall and there he could see that the, the wait staff and the cooks dressed in their finest. They just served a beautiful turkey dinner. And someone had, had painted the nativity scene on one of the walls and the whole room was decorated in crepe paper streamers and tin can stars. Someone even brought in a, a sagebrush and decorated it with tinfoil and, and cotton ball snow - a Christmas tree. There was even a Christmas wreath made of wood shavings, and Christmas carols were playing very softly on a small radio. You see, in camp, you didn't celebrate Christmas just with your family but with all the families of your block.

And, suddenly, then the door slammed open and someone began shouting. Kiyoshi immediately thought of the men who had come to take his Otosan away, his father. He dove under the table, clapped his hands over his ears, and shut his eyes. He didn't see that the man who was coming in was dressed in a red suit, had a long, red hat, and a white beard. What he saw were the men in the suits taking his Otosan away while he's dressed in his pajamas. He didn't hear the man shout out, "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!" What he heard was his mother weeping.

All the other children gathered around Santa Claus as he sat down his sack and began handing out presents. Then, suddenly, someone touched Kiyoshi on his shoulder. It was his best friend, Tommy, "Kiyoshi, there you are! Santa Claus is here and he brought presents!"

Kiyoshi climbed out from under the table, saw this man dressed in this ruffled, red suit and a cotton ball beard who was gesturing to him. "Aw, Kiyoshi-chan, aw, aw, I've got a present for you!"

"A present? For me?"

"Aw, Reverend Townsend and Shigeko Uno had written letters to all these churches across the United States telling them about the situation here in camp and I have presents for all the children here in Minidoka. And I picked this one out just for you."

And he handed Kiyoshi this oddly-shaped object dressed... wrapped in brilliant red paper and green ribbons.

"And, I, I know it's hard with your Ootosan, your father, away. But Kiyoshi-chan, do you know this Japanese word, gaman? It means to bear, to carry on, to not complain. We must adjust to the new situation. We must prove to everyone else that we are Americans first, ne? Wakade mas ka? Do you understand?"

"Hai! Wakade mas. I understand."

"Aw, very good. Aw, now, I must go and deliver presents to all the other children in all the other mess halls. Now remember, gaman, Merry Christmas!"

And he was gone. Kiyoshi looked down at his present; he wasn't forgotten. Santa remembered. Santa still cared. And he began to unwrap his present as all the other children, all the people in the mess hall began filing out 'cause the camp choir was singing Christmas carols outside in the snow.

And what emerged from the wrapping paper was this toy wooden truck. And Kiyoshi felt his chest tightened. It reminded him of that old truck that his father used to carry groceries from their farm into the markets in Portland. That small, cold, empty space in Kiyoshi's stomach opened up and threatened to swallow him down.

Gaman. How could he carry on? He was just a little boy. He missed his father. He just wanted to go home. Tears began rolling down his cheeks. And he didn't hear the door open up behind him while the footsteps approaching him.

"That is a beautiful truck you have there, Kiyoshi-chan."

Kiyoshi turned around and looked at this man, gray hair, glasses. Who was this man? He didn't recognize him until he reached out and tousled his hair. "Ootosan! Father!"

And suddenly he was in his father's arms smelling his smell. Aw, and that cold, empty spot just melted away and was replaced with this glowing warmth that make his whole body tingle.

"Father, how? When?"

"Aw, they let me go, Kiyoshi-chan so I could be here with all of you. Come! Let's go outside and, and listen to the choir!"

So, hand-in-hand, they went outside but Kiyoshi couldn't see so his father picked him up, put him up on his shoulders, and Kiyoshi balanced there with one hand on his father's hat and one around his new toy truck. These three Army flatbed trucks have been pulled up in a "U" and the camp choir was standing on the trucks being led by Mae Hara, who the camp... the choir director. She had a baton with a little light on the end of it and she was leading them in Christmas carols.

And to five-year-old Kiyoshi balancing there his father's shoulders, he knew that he could carry any weight, bear any burden. Gaman. To him, it was the best Christmas ever.

