

Look to the Sky: America's Concentration Camps



John Tonai

John Tonai was GLA's February virtual program speaker. He showed photos from his documentary photographic exhibit "Look to the Sky" of camps Amachi, Gila, Heart Mountain, Jerome, and Manzanar. Tonai's commentary of each black-and-white photo shown was interesting, informative and enlightening. One looked at the photos with new eyes. John Tonai will show photos of camps Minidoka, Poston, Rohwer, Topaz and Tule Lake at a later date.

report by Louise Sakamoto

The presentation was recorded. John Tonai gave GLA permission to have it available on GLA website. The following bio and project statement are John Tonai's.

Following, also, is announcement of the program that appeared in RAFU SHIMPO, 2/1/2022 issue, p.3

John Tonai

Bio

John Tonai was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, California. After having lived in Sioux Falls, SD, Greeley, CO and Minneapolis, MN, he currently lives in Woodland Hills, CA. He received a Masters of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of Minnesota, and a Masters of Art in Visual Art from the University of Northern Colorado. In addition, he received a BA in History and Secondary Teaching Credentials from the University of Sioux Falls.

His thesis work for his MA involved visiting and photographing the 10 WRA concentration camps from 1990-1992. The photographs have been exhibited in Los Angeles, CA (Japanese American National Museum and Family Expo), Minneapolis, MN (PArts Gallery), Laramie WY (University of Wyoming), San Francisco, CA (National Japanese American Historical Society) and Independence, CA (Manzanar National Historic Site). He continues to return to photograph the sites to document the changes that have occurred.

Tonai recently retired as an Associate Professor of Photography to return home to California. He currently works at the Japanese American National Museum as a Production Coordinator and Collections Photographer.

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Project Statement

Look to the Sky: America's Concentration Camps is a documentary photography project depicting the contemporary physical conditions of the 10 WWII War Relocation Authority camps. The title, *Look to the Sky* was inspired by the artist Chiura Obata. During my research into the camps, there was a story of how the incarcerated at Topaz were complaining to Obata about how awful it was at the camp. His response was to tell them to look around. During the initial visits to all ten sites I was inspired by the contrast between the mostly dead and ruined areas on the ground and the beautiful sunsets and clouds in the sky. This became the inspiration for capturing the camps in a way that emphasized both the horrors and beauty of the camps.

As a Sansei who was born 15 years after the closing of the camps, I have no firsthand knowledge of what it was like to be forced from my home and sent to what are essentially prison farms in rural areas of America. Unlike many others of my generation, stories of "camp" were regularly told to my sisters and me by our parents-so much so, that after awhile, many of their stories were tucked away in my memory, to be completely forgotten.

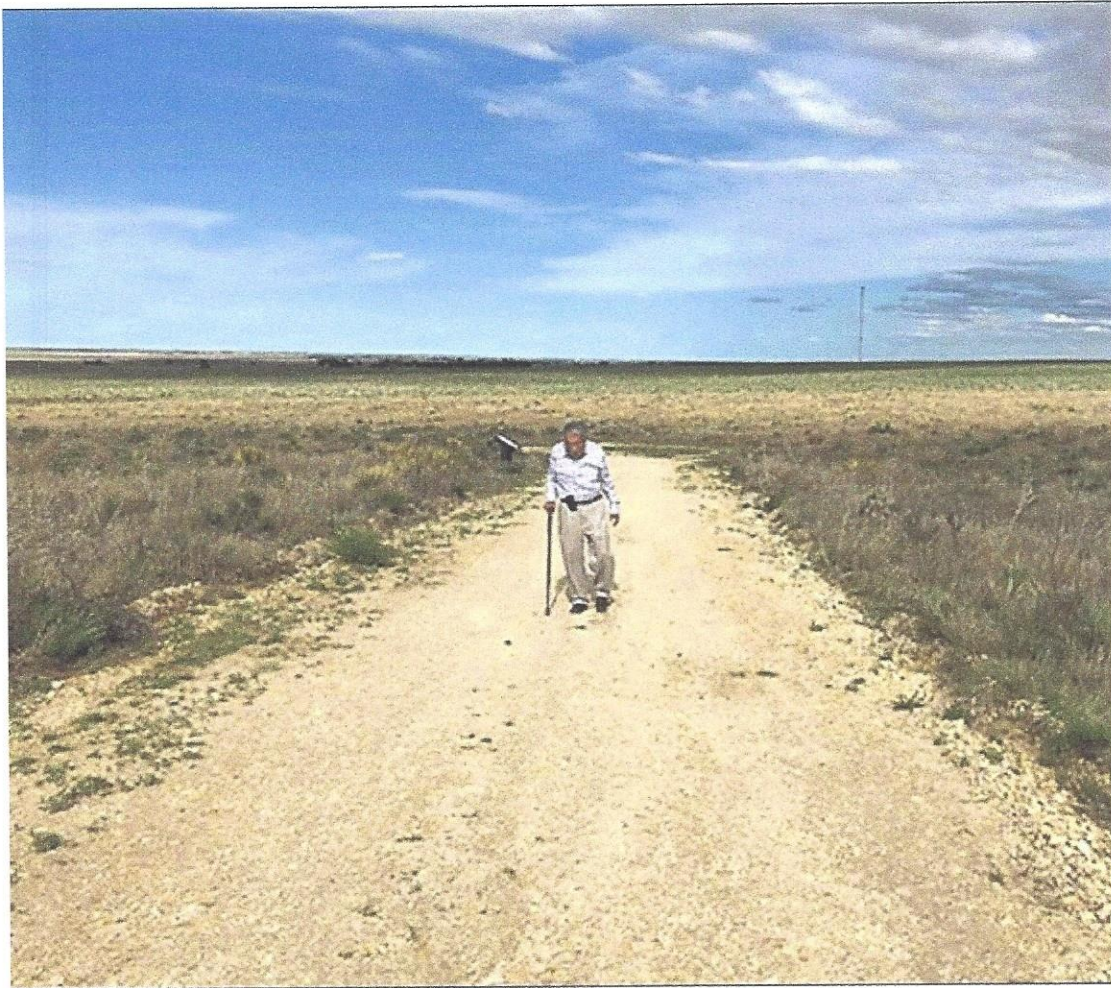
The project started when I decided to travel down to Amache and photograph the camp. I was living in Greeley, Colorado at the time and it was around a 4 hour drive. When I arrived and starting taking photos of my father's family barracks and the surrounding roads, all of the stories he told me, the ones I so callously ignored, came flooding back to me. I could see my father walking down the road with his friends, running indoors at the approach of a summer storm and going to block dances. This became the pivotal moment that I knew I had to photograph all 10 sites with the goal of possibly providing the descendants of the incarcerated the inspiration of finding out their family stories.

The initial project took place from 1990-1992. Since that time I've revisited most of the sites and recorded the changes that have taken place. In some cases objects and building have been destroyed or removed (Some examples include: the diving platform at Heart Mountain, the firehouse and outbuilding at Tule Lake, the auditorium at Poston) and in other cases, buildings have been returned to the sites and/or have been fixed up, and reproductions have been built (The auditorium at Manzanar was still a working garage for the Inyo County when this project started, the mess hall and barrack was returned to Minidoka and the original water tank and a recreation hall was returned to Amache).

The first exhibit opened on the 50th anniversary of the first people to enter the Owens Valley Reception Center, which eventually became the Manzanar War Relocation Center. Since that time it has been exhibited in various forms at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles in 1992, the Family Expo at the L.A. Convention Center in 1994, at Parts Gallery in Minneapolis, MN in 1997, the University of Wyoming in Laramie, WY in 1998, at the National Japanese American National Historical Society in San Francisco, CA in 1999 and at the Manzanar National Historical Site in 2004.

Presentation by 'Look to the Sky' Author

John Tonai to discuss images taken at 10 JA camps for GLA JACL virtual program on Feb. 13.



The Greater Los Angeles JACL Chapter will present a virtual program on Sunday, Feb. 13, at 1 p.m.

“Look to the Sky: America’s Concentration Camps” is a documentary photography project by John Tonai depicting the contemporary physical conditions of the 10 World War II War Relocation Authority camps.

The initial project took place from 1990-1992. Since that time, Tonai has revisited most of the sites and recorded the changes that have taken place.

Tonai will talk about the photos in the exhibit.

The exhibit has been shown in various forms at different venues, including the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles.

The title comes from Tonai being inspired by the contrast between the mostly dead and ruined areas on the ground and the beautiful sunsets and clouds in the sky. This became the inspiration for capturing the camps in a

Photo by John Tonai

John Tonai’s father, Minoru Tonai, walks up the gravel road away from the Amache, Colo. block where members of his family and he lived during World War II.

way that emphasized both the horrors and beauty of the locations.

Tonai recently retired as an associate professor of photography at University of Northern Colorado. He currently works at JANM as a production coordinator and collections photographer.

For a Zoom link to the program and more information, email Louise at louise@janm.org