

ORAL HISTORY
GEORGE YONEHIRO
(1922-2001)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The oral history of George Yonehiro is one of four oral histories conducted by the former California State Bar Committee on History of Law in California in 1987. These were the final oral histories conducted by the committee, and they are published for the first time in the present volume of *California Legal History* (vol. 6, 2011). Yonehiro was interviewed by committee member Raymond R. Roberts on January 21, 1987.

The oral history has been reedited for publication. The spelling of names has been corrected wherever possible, and explanatory notations in [square brackets] have been added by the editor. The sound recording and original transcription are available at The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. The oral history is published by permission of the State Bar of California.

As an introduction to Judge Yonehiro's life and career, the obituary published by *The Auburn Journal* at the time of his death in 2001 is reproduced below.¹

— SELMA MOIDEL SMITH

¹ Gus Thomson, "Former Placer County Superior Court Judge passes away," *The Auburn Journal* (March 28, 2001), p. A5.

GEORGE YONEHIRO

Former Placer County Superior Court Judge George Yonehiro is dead at age 78. Yonehiro, who spent 21 years on the municipal and justice court benches before serving as superior court judge from 1985 until his retirement in 1988, died Sunday in Auburn.

A native of Placer County's Gold Hill area, Yonehiro graduated from Roseville High School and what was then Sacramento Junior College.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Yonehiro and his family joined other Placer County Japanese-Americans who were relocated to Tule Lake, California. During 1942-43, 119,803 men, women and children of Japanese descent were placed behind barbed wire.

In early 1943, the secretary of war announced a decision to form an all-Nisei combat team and Yonehiro enlisted. Yonehiro fought in Italy and France as an infantryman. He served with the all-Japanese 442nd Regimental Combat Team — one of the most decorated American units of the war. Yonehiro was awarded the Bronze Star medal but didn't find out about it until the mid-1980s when he requested a new copy of his discharge papers. By then a colonel in the California State Military Reserve, Yonehiro was presented the award by Gen. Donald Mattson, commander of the California Military Reserve. During the war, Yonehiro also received a Purple Heart medal.

Following the war, Yonehiro entered the John Marshall Law School in Chicago. He practiced law in Chicago for seven years.

Moving back to Placer County, Yonehiro was elected Colfax Justice Court judge in 1964, a position he held until 1980, when he headed both the Auburn and Colfax lower courts. In 1982, he was elected to the newly created municipal court by garnering 23,638 votes to his opponent's 8,674.

When Gov. George Deukmejian appointed then-attorney Jackson Willoughby to a Placer County Superior Court seat in 1984 over Yonehiro, the veteran jurist quickly announced that he would challenge the appointment in the June primary. Yonehiro won easily and was sworn in early the next year at St. Joseph's Parish Center with 300 people present.

Yonehiro is survived by his wife of 47 years, Miyoko; daughters Melissa Yonehiro Caldwell of Sacramento and Alison Dee Miller of Seattle; a son, Marcus Yonehiro [U.S. naval officer on active duty in the port] of Yokosuka, Japan; a sister, May Sagara of Granada Hills; and three grandchildren.

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Q: It is January 21st, 1987, and I'm in the chambers of Judge George Yonehiro. He has consented to give us a few of his thoughts and reminiscences about the practice of law as it pertains to him. So, let me start off by asking when your earliest ancestor came to the United States or to California.

YONEHIRO: Initially, my dad was a newspaper reporter for an Osaka, Japan, newspaper. He got sent to the Hawaiian Islands to cover the Japanese immigrants there. He so loved the climate and geographic area of the islands, he resigned from the Osaka, Japan, newspaper and took on employment with a Hilo, Hawaii, newspaper.

Q: When was that?

YONEHIRO: This was 1912. He stayed in the Islands for seven years, doing newspaper reporting work. Also, during the course of seven years, he joined the United States Army. In that way, he was one of the few Asiatics who became automatically eligible for naturalization.

Q: When he joined the Army, was that the regular Army or the reserves?

YONEHIRO: The regular Army. He was stationed at Fort Shafter, just before the early part of 1918. He must have got in shortly before the declaration of World War I by the United States. I think that was the early part of 1918. America was involved in the World War for only a short time — a year or less — and during the '19, possibly '17 or '18, period he was with the regular U.S. Army — infantry.

Q: Stationed in Hawaii?

YONEHIRO: Yes, Fort Shafter. After he concluded his service with the U.S. Army — around 1919 — he came to the mainland. While he was in Hawaii, he held a close friendship with a person who had a gambling den. His buddy and he came over in 1919 to the mainland, and he urged him to join in gambling activities in the city of Sacramento. By that time my dad had gotten married. He felt that he couldn't raise a family in a gambling atmosphere, connected with a gambling enterprise, so he decided to become a farmer. He always felt that the rural atmosphere was most conducive to raising children. He was a very poor farmer, always a good newspaper man. He always maintained contacts with various newspapers. During the course of his career, he one time held paid correspondence with five newspapers and he did work for various newspapers until he was seventy years of age.

Q: Where did your mother come from?

YONEHIRO: My mother also came from Japan. During the period my father was in Hawaii he had visited Japan two times. On the second visit, just before he left for the American mainland, he married my mother. They were both from the Honshu Island. There are three major islands in Japan. The middle Island is Honshu. They are both from the Hiroshima area.

Q: And when were they married?

YONEHIRO: They were married in 1917.

Q: So they evidently met in Hawaii?

YONEHIRO: No, sir they did not meet in Hawaii. On one of my dad's visits back to Japan, he met my mother.

Q: I see. And where were they married?

YONEHIRO: In Japan, sir.