

Bonsai Behind Barbed Wire Script

[Music]

Tyler: In the spring of 1942, Frank Nagata put his family on a bus in Los Angeles, and went home to load up his car.

Noel: It was an old Ford Model A--one of those boxy-topped cars with the frog-eye headlights, the spoked wheels, and the big running boards along the side.

Tyler: Frank and his family were being forcibly relocated in the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Most people of Japanese descent on the West coast who got relocated were only allowed to take whatever they could carry with them. But Frank's daughter said he somehow got permission to bring more.

Noel: Alongside the clothes, photos, and other personal effects, he managed to squeeze some of his most prized possessions into his car: several BONSAI TREES, like old family members propped up on the seats.

Thomas Elias: They took a few small ones, because they couldn't take their whole collection. They didn't have a lot of time--advance notice.

Tyler: This is Thomas S. Elias, retired director of the National Arboretum in Washington D.C.

Thomas Elias: They sat on the curb side and tried to sell some of them. And the ones they couldn't sell they just gave to some of their friends to keep for them. And so, whatever he could pack into his car, is all he could take.

Tyler: Then, Frank Nagata drove to meet up with his family at the Santa Anita Race Track in Arcadia, California.

Noel: He and EIGHTEEN THOUSAND other people of Japanese ancestry would be held there until they could be relocated.

Tyler: They had no idea how long they'd be gone, or if they'd ever be able to go home.

Noel: Four months later, Frank Nagata, his family, and his bonsai trees were sent to AMACHE, a prison camp just outside the arid, wind-scraped town of Granada, Colorado near the Kansas border.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: It was one of ten prison camps spread out across the western United States.

Noel: All told, almost A HUNDRED and TWENTY THOUSAND people of Japanese descent were sent to these camps for the remainder of the war.

Tyler: Nearly 2/3rds of them were American citizens.

[Lost Highways theme music by Conor Bourgal fades in]

Tyler: From History Colorado studios, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black.

Tyler: On each episode, Noel and I explore overlooked stories from our home state of Colorado, and the American West.

[ambient noises - crowd chatter]

Noel: Two summers ago, I happened into an exhibition of bonsai trees. It was put on by the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Club at the Denver Botanic Gardens. I'm mostly an introvert, but there's something about really specific subcultures that brings me out of my shell, and I love to talk to people about their obsessions. While talking to one of the artists, he mentioned something interesting:

Tyler: He said that 75 years ago, the Denver Bonsai Club was an all-Japanese club.

Noel: All its members were of Japanese descent, and all the classes were taught in Japanese.

Tyler: Eventually, the founders of the club created a SECOND bonsai club in Denver for non-Japanese speakers.

Noel: It wasn't long before the english-speaking club was REALLY popular.

Tyler: But the Japanese-speaking club got smaller and smaller as the members got older and some began to die.

Noel: At one point, the two clubs tried to MERGE into a SINGLE CLUB.

Tyler: But the merger never happened.

Noel: And to THIS DAY there are still TWO clubs: The Denver Bonsai Club, which is the original, and The Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society, the English-speaking club.

Tyler: We were told that the merger failed because there was some sort of cultural conflict between the clubs.

Noel: But nobody we talked to seemed to know why. So we got curious.

Tyler: I've been kind of obsessed with bonsai ever since I was a little kid, when I used to watch this cartoon about space-traveling penguins. Every time the pilot penguin was about to hit the throttle, he would yell.

[3-2-1 Penguins! audio clip]

“BONSAIIIIIIIIII!”

[Fade out 3-2-1 Penguins! Clip]

Tyler: But instead of jumping to hyperspeed...

[Penguins 3-2-1 audio clip - music and tree snipping sounds]

Tyler: A little tree would come up, which he would mindfully clip and prune before hitting the gas. I begged my parents to buy me a bonsai tree for months. But they didn't want me to kill it, and I never got one. So when I heard this story, I was immediately REALLY into it.

[Music fades in]

Noel: We made a few phone calls, and poked around on the internet.

Tyler: But all we could find was ONE sentence at the very end of the “History” section of the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society website. It said: “However, the cultures of the two clubs were very different and the merger did not work.”

Noel: What we didn't know is that trying to figure out what that ONE SENTENCE meant would lead us to a much BIGGER story.

Tyler: It's a story about perseverance and adaption. And how even the smallest things can have enormous significance.

[music fades out]

[Audio from Tyler & Noel meeting with Patrick Allen]

[Patrick Allen: So here is our native tree. Colorado blue spruce.]

[Tyler: Oh which one?]

[Patrick Allen: This one here -- And so that tree is -- It was collected with a permit from South Park...]

Tyler: This is Patrick Allen. He's the unofficial club historian for the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society, and he wrote the history page of their website.

Noel: Patrick told us that one of the goals of bonsai is to create a miniature version of the environment where the tree ACTUALLY came from. In this case, it's a landscape featuring Colorado's state tree.

[Patrick Allen: And you can see where the branches are that I took the bark off. That's called Jin. And so that's supposed to simulate a little bit like the lightning strikes and everything that a 300-year-old tree goes through in the Rockies.]

Noel: He shows us a Limber Pine that's about 300 years old and maybe a couple feet tall. He says he found it in a crack between two huge granite rocks.

[Patrick Allen: And that kept those roots small. And boy they're just snapping up any piece of water they can find. And they make it.]

[Tyler: So. Oh OK. So I realize I may have a misconception about....Is this is the whole tree or is this a piece of the tree?]

[Patrick Allen: That's it, it's a whole tree.]

[Tyler: Oh wow, and is that true of all of the trees?]

[Patrick Allen: Yes.]

[Tyler: Wow.]

[Audio fades out]

Tyler: Patrick was a wealth of knowledge about the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society, the ENGLISH speaking club.

Noel: But when it came to the history of the Japanese-speaking club, or the conflict BETWEEN the two clubs, it turned out he didn't know a whole lot more than we did...

[Patrick Allen: We don't want to say something we don't know for sure. Somebody's going to hear this, fifty years from now, and we don't want to make a mistake.]

Tyler: But he told us there was someone who WOULD know more.

[Patrick Allen: Gary can actually tell you. He's very close, much closer to that. So Gary can really bring you up to date on it.]

Noel: Patrick put us in touch with Gary Matsuda. He's a member of BOTH clubs and served as president of the Japanese-speaking club for a time.

Tyler: We met up with Gary at his house in Commerce City, Colorado,

Noel: just outside of Denver.

[Ambient audio from Matsuda's home - inaudible chatter between Matsuda and Tyler]

[Gary Matsuda: If I close this it might be....]

[Tyler: Oh yeah that's a lot quieter...]

Noel: When we got there, he showed us a few of his trees, a couple of which are hundreds of years old and had belonged to the founding members of the original club.

[Gary Matsuda: So these two trees are very old. I suspect this one here is probably over 300 years old. This one maybe two hundred fifty years old. Yeah these are both native ponderosa pine and they were harvested in the mountains west to Fort Collins.]

Tyler: The tree is remarkable. Even though it's only a couple feet tall, it looks like something out of *Lord of the Rings*. The trunk seems almost magically gnarled and twisted, and several long, flat branches stick out from the top in all different directions.

Noel: Despite the fact that it's centuries old, Gary tells me it's STILL in training. The thinner branches are covered in copper wire that he has meticulously placed in order to give it the contorted shape of a wind-blown tree in the wild.

Tyler: When we went inside for the interview, we asked him about the two clubs and the failed merger.

Noel: But HE didn't know much more than Patrick did, either

Tyler: Can you tell me more about that conflict, how the clubs... Did they split, and then try to merge, or one was kind of an offshoot of the other club?

Gary Matsuda: Well, with... I'm really not able to really tell you in detail of that. My only interpretation was, it was a language barrier and also maybe a little bit of a cultural difference...

[Audio fades out]

Tyler: So he sent us along to someone else.

[Gary Matsuda: Oh definitely Harold... is... He's a great speaker and he knows he knows it all, so he would be able to tell you in detail.]

Noel: Harold is Harold Sasaki, who sometimes goes by Hal.

Tyler: He's a major figure in bonsai communities not just in Colorado, but all across North America. He was also one of the early members of the Japanese-speaking club.

Noel: AND he played a huge role in helping a lot of people from the ENGLISH SPEAKING CLUB get their start in bonsai.

Tyler: We met up with Hal back at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

Harold Sasaki: Bonsai. Basically, what- what is a bonsai? Bonsai basically means that a plant that resides in a bon. This is the bon. The container is the bon. Any plant material that can be captured or grown in a container is a bonsai.

Harold Sasaki: It's almost like a mystical tree or a tree in your imagination that the plant will allow you to project that into a lifeform, or three dimensional form.

[Harold continues speaking in the background of Noel's narration]

Noel: He showed us around the bonsai pavilion at the gardens, and told us about some of the trees there, including a stunning Blue Spruce, which, again, is Colorado's state tree.

Harold Sasaki: Yeah. It is a blue spruce. You see the apex is directly over the trunk. Okay. But this one is still has some wiggle in it. So that probably wouldn't particularly qualify as being a formal upright. But basically...

[Audio fades out to Tyler narrating]

Tyler: After we look at the bonsai, we sit down on a bench by a stream in the Japanese gardens.

[ambient sounds - a stream flows nearby]

Noel: At this point, Hal seemed like our last best chance to understand what happened with the two clubs.

Tyler: can you tell us about that original club? What was their approach to bonsai? What was the kind of culture of the club? Things like that.

Harold Sasaki: No it's kind of tough to say. You know what. I don't know whether I'll be in any position to really say it but I knew that the only language that they fully exchange was, the information was in Japanese. And so it became more exclusive unless you - unless you understood the language and stuff like that, you were pretty much excluded.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: We were just about to give up on the whole bonsai story. But I have this thing where I get really fixated on whatever I'm interested in, and I was too stubborn to let it go. So I went back through the transcripts of all our interviews one last time.

Noel: That's when Tyler came across this tape from our interview with Patrick Allen.

[Patrick Allen: They had their own club, and everything.]

[Tyler: Do you know how they met?]

[Patrick Allen: Oh they all knew each other, you know, from the camps.]

Noel: The founders of the Denver Bonsai Club, THEY all knew each other FROM THE CAMPS.

[Music fades into underwriting]

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360 breweries and counting. More than just a tale of Ale, “Beer Here” is a story of Colorado, told over a few beers.

[Music fades into Noel narrating]

Noel: On February 19, 1942, just 3 months after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed executive order 9066.

[Franklin D. Roosevelt 9066 audio excerpt]

Franklin D. Roosevelt: When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, our West Coast became a potential combat zone. Living in that zone were more than 100,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of them American citizens, one-third aliens. We knew that some among them were potentially dangerous, most were loyal. But no one knew what would happen amongst this concentrated population if Japanese forces should try to invade our shores. Military authorities therefore determined that all of them, citizens and aliens alike, would have to move.

[End of audio excerpt]

Tyler: The order forcibly removed all people of Japanese ancestry from large parts of the West Coast of the United States and placed them in 10 prison camps throughout the Western U.S.

Dr. William Wei: Asians historically have been unwelcome to the United States. They were viewed as unwelcome immigrants. They didn't fit our understanding what an immigrant should look like.

Noel: This is William Wei.

Dr. William Wei: ...professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I am also a member of the state historians council and soon to be the state historian. In fact, by the time this is broadcast I *will* be the state historian.

Noel: He's also the author of *Asians in Colorado: A History of Persecution and Perseverance in the Centennial State*.

Tyler: Dr. Wei told us that Asians have been coming to the United States pretty much since Western Imperialists first landed in China. But Asian emigration to the American West really started taking off in the mid 1800s during the California Gold Rush, when huge amounts of Chinese prospectors came to the West Coast.

Noel: After that, Chinese labor became a major part of the US economy.

Dr. William Wei: The most famous of which was the building of the western portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. And once the transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory Point they were dumped on the western labor market. They went about looking for different

types of work which included building the infrastructure of the American West which quite frankly made it a viable place to live.

Tyler: Chinese workers were also responsible for a lot of the mining that happened in Colorado and other parts of the American West.

Noel: And Chinese labor became SUCH an essential part of the expansion happening in the West that many began to resent them.

Dr. William Wei: This would result in inter-ethnic competition and ultimately lead to their expulsion from towns in the West and, in the case of Colorado, to the anti-Chinese riot in Denver in 1880 and two years later they would pass a law, the Chinese Exclusion Act. They became the only group named specifically in legislation to be excluded from the country.

Noel: And the exclusion act led to a shortage of cheap labor in the West.

Tyler: At that point, labor recruiters turned their eyes to Japan to fill the gap left by the Chinese immigrants who could no longer enter the country.

Naomi Hirahara: Some of it was word of mouth and some of it was a more of a concerted effort by recruiters.

Noel: This is Naomi Hirahara.

Tyler: She's the author of a book called *Greenmakers: Japanese American Gardeners of Southern California*.

Noel: She told us that in the late 19th Century, Japanese immigrants started coming to Hawai'i and the West Coast for a number of reasons.

Tyler: Japan was at war, and a lot of people didn't want to get drafted.

Noel: Not to mention that a lot of people in Japan were facing extreme poverty.

Tyler: So when they heard there was work in the US, they started to emigrate.

Naomi Hirahara: And in terms of work of course agriculture was the biggest one.

Tyler: Many of these Japanese immigrants had been farmers in Japan, and horticulture has always been a transitional entry level job for first-generation immigrants.

Noel: They started working all across the Western US...In RURAL areas, they worked mostly as farmers.

Dr. William Wei: They were often engaged in seasonal work, such as the harvesting of the beet crop, which is very important to Colorado's economy. In fact they referred to beet sugar as "white gold".

Tyler: And in the CITIES, they mostly worked as gardeners. Because even though there was a huge amount of anti-Asian racism at the time, there was ALSO a huge demand among elites to have gardens with a Japanese aesthetic.

Naomi Hirahara: There's a lot of postcards of Japanese style gardens throughout the U.S. and there, they always have the woman in kimono, is always there. And I think that for people was just the the apex of being exotic. And it's proof that the person that had this garden was very worldly.

Noel: It was a form of orientalism, says Hirahara--romanticizing Asian culture with no regard for the actual people who create that culture.

Naomi Hirahara: This was kind of a feather in their hat you know... something that showed that they were very sophisticated and elite. And even in the 1920s...

[Audio fades out]

Tyler: But immigrants and migrant laborers from Japan would end up facing the same xenophobia and racism that the Chinese immigrants had.

[Music]

Dr. William Wei: In the case of the Japanese this would come about as a result of the so-called “Gentlemen's Agreement,” a secret agreement in 1907. And then subsequently with the Immigration Act of 1924, they would be excluded altogether.

Tyler: There were also several pieces of legislation that excluded Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized US citizens. Eligibility for naturalization started to move away from being racially defined in the 1940s. But piecemeal legislation that prevented Asians from naturalizing wasn't FULLY repealed until nineteen FIFTY TWO. That's just FOUR YEARS before my mom, who's an Asian immigrant and naturalized US citizen herself, was born.

Noel: And in addition to the anti-Asian sentiment due to labor conflicts, Asians in America faced even more discrimination as Japan became an imperial power in the 20th century.

Dr. William Wei: Those that were within the United States were viewed as an economic threat. Those viewed outside of it were seen as a national threat. And hence, a threat to us, our way of life, that sort of thing.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Then, on December 7th, 1941...

[Audio excerpt of Franklin D. Roosevelt Infamy speech]

... a date which will live in infamy the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

[End of audio excerpt]

Noel: When FDR signed Order 9066, on February 19, 1942, he authorized the forced removal of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast of the United States.

Tyler: Before they were sent to camps, they were given a brief period of time in which they could quote "VOLUNTARILY" relocate. And during that time, many came to Colorado.

Dr. William Wei: It was governor Ralph Carr who welcomed the Japanese to the state because he viewed them as American citizens and, as such, should be treated as American citizens. So he welcomed them to Colorado. And eventually he would lose his political career by standing up for the Japanese Americans.

Tyler: Those who DIDN'T voluntarily relocate were eventually sent to 10 hastily-built prison camps. They were spread out across especially remote areas of California, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Arkansas, and Arizona.

Noel: It's worth noting that Hawai'i also had a massive population of people of Japanese ancestry, but they weren't sent to the camps, because they made up so much of the labor force there.

Tyler: You may have heard these camps referred to as “internment camps,” but that’s not TECHNICALLY accurate.

Hanako Wakatsuki: “Internment” under the Geneva Convention means that, you know, the people that you’re at war with and the civilians of that nation are interned. Right. But because two-thirds of the people were actually American citizens, that doesn’t qualify as internment. It was an imprisonment. They imprisoned people who were United States citizens because of ethnicity. Like Japanese Americans were not incarcerated because there was evidence against them. There was no evidence. There was no due process.

Tyler: This is Hanako Wakatsuki. She’s the Chief of Interpretation and Education at the Minidoka National Historical Site. That’s the camp that was in Idaho. And she says that, academically-speaking, there are only a couple words that can be used to accurately describe these camps.

Noel: At the historical site, they tend to use the terms “prison camp” or “incarceration camp”.

Hanako Wakatsuki: But it is actually indeed correct that they were a concentration camp. Roosevelt called it a concentration camp before all the atrocities out of Europe were coming out, and even the governor of the state of Idaho said you know essentially like he didn’t want any J-A-Ps here. And if so, he wants them in a concentration camp with guns pointing at them.

Tyler: For the rest of this episode, we'll be using the terms "incarceration camp", "prison camp", and "concentration camp" interchangeably, based on the widely-accepted academic definition of a concentration camp: which is a camp where a population is CONCENTRATED into one area.

Noel: To get a better sense of what life in those camps was actually like, we met up with Bob Fuchigami at his home in Lakewood, just west of Denver. When you walk into his apartment, there are binders everywhere. They're full of research, and have AMACHE written on the spines in big block letters.

Bob Fuchigami: I'm Bob Fuchigami... Sometimes call me Robert. That's really not my name, but (laughs)... I have a Japanese name: Yoshimitsu... But when the schoolteachers couldn't pronounce the name they gave me the name Robert.

Tyler: When Bob was 11 years old, he and his family were told they had to leave their 20 acre farm in Marysville, California near Sacramento.

Noel: Because of laws that prevented Japanese immigrants from owning land, the Fuchigamis had put the farm in the name of Bob's older brother -- a teenager at the time -- who knew virtually nothing about real estate.

Tyler: When they left, The Fuchigamis leased their land to a teacher from the local high school. They had been working it for years and it was just getting to the point that they could make a profit.

Noel: But the teacher had taken advantage of Bob's brother. The fine print in the lease included an option to buy the land.

Tyler: Later, while they were incarcerated, he exercised that option and made a LOT of money.

[Music fades in]

Noel: The Fuchigamis, like many Japanese Americans who were forced from their land, lost everything. Bob told us about the days just before they left.

Bob Fuchigami: You keep going to school until it's time to leave. And then what do you do, you know, is, well, we open up the cages here for the rabbits because you're not gonna be here to feed them. So that's what I did. I just opened the door and let the rabbits out. And, you know, you couldn't bring your dog. So you just turned them loose and maybe they ate the rabbits. I don't know.

Noel: I asked Bob if he remembered what he brought with him.

Bob Fuchigami: Oh well you have a baseball mitt. Can't bring a bat or anything like that, but you can bring a baseball mitt and a bag of marbles. I was a kid.

Noel: The Fuchigamis were temporarily incarcerated in Merced, California, before being put on a train to Amache.

Bob Fuchigami: The only thing we knew is that we were going to Colorado. The only thing I knew about Colorado was it had the Rocky Mountains and we didn't end up in the Rocky Mountains. We wound up in the desert. It used to be a dust bowl area and we still had dust storms in Amache. There were days when you couldn't see from here to the door.

Tyler: The camps had been built in a hurry. The barracks were flimsy and makeshift, covered in nothing but tar paper. Here's William Wei again.

[Music fades out]

Dr. William Wei: The best way to understand them is to try to imagine a military base. That's what they look like. Yeah. Row upon row of barracks that were surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers where, by the way, you had soldiers with machine guns pointing *inward* rather than *outward*. It was said that they were being sent there for their safety. But as the Japanese Americans who were in the camp said, if it was for our safety how come all the guns were pointing inward rather than outward?

Bob Fuchigami: First there were the conditions of barracks living. Upon arrival in the barracks, we found a room void of furnishings. We didn't have - there was nothing in there, except for a canvas cot for each person, a thin cotton mattress, and two wool blankets for each individual. The room had a single light bulb hanging down in the center of the room, and a small black pot-bellied stove. The floor was -- it was a single layer of bricks, that was all. There was no water in the barracks.

Dr. William Wei: It's been described in a variety of ways but the one thing people all agree especially if you are young is that it was "booooring". You have a lot of, for instance, young people who were languishing in these camps because there was nothing to do there. You could work of course, in the agricultural fields.

Noel: Bob Fuchigami worked while he was at Amache.

Tyler: He would spend all day unloading cargo trains in the blistering heat. But the pay was meager at best. He made 8 dollars, a month.

Noel: He told us about the *one* time he splurged and bought a root beer float at a drug store called Newman's in the nearby town of Granada. It cost 35 cents.

Bob Fuchigami: But that's a whole day's pay. And I tried that once and I thought: This is ridiculous. I'd love to get a malt or a root beer float but it didn't make any sense to blow a day's wages on that. And I talked to a guy named Newman who is still alive. He lives here in Denver. And he said "Yeah, You guys paid for my college education". He was just a kid. We were about the same age and he was working the counter.

[Music fades in]

Noel: Bob told us that one of the few UP sides of his experience at Amache was being around so many other people like him..

Bob Fuchigami: I never saw so many people of Japanese (laughs) persons of Japanese ancestry in my life.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: And for many of the incarcerated, being around other Japanese people for the first time wasn't just a matter of familiarity and comfort, but an opportunity to reconnect with their culture.

[ambient sounds - bells tolling]

Noel: We wanted to find out more about the role that Japanese culture played in the camps. So we went to see Dr. Bonnie Clark at the University of Denver.

Tyler: Dr. Clark is an archaeologist and anthropologist, and she's done a lot of work on the gardens at Amache.

Noel: We were also curious to see if she knew anything about Bonsai in the camps.

[Fade in audio excerpt of Tyler and Noel visiting Dr. Clark]

[Tyler: Hi.]

[Noel: Hi, im Noel.]

[Dr. Bonnie Clark: Hi, Nice to meet you.]

[Noel: This is Tyler]

[Tyler: I'm Tyler. Nice to meet you.]

[Dr. Bonnie Clark: Hi, Nice to meet you. We can go into the lab, it looks terrible...]

[Audio fades out to Noel narrating]

Noel: Bonnie gave us a quick tour of the archaeology lab. It's a big open room with large tables and shelves full of carefully organized and tagged artifacts that look like they spent plenty of time underground.

Tyler: Dr. Clark reminded us just how desolate the landscape of the camps would have been when the incarcerated arrived.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: ... just coming out of the Dust Bowl. It's very very sandy. And yet time and time again as we're doing work in these Amache gardens we find stones like this.

[Ambient sounds - rustling]

Noel: She pulls out a big chunk of white quartz, and explains to us how she and her team often unearth ornamental rocks from garden site digs at Amache.

Tyler: These rocks are especially significant because they clearly come from places outside of the camp.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: And I think when they're working on local farms they are picking up stone and bringing it back to camp with them.

Tyler: Dr. Clark explains to us the significance that things like rocks and trees would have had to the incarcerated. They can trace this emphasis on nature back to Shinto.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: and Shinto is this sort of set of folk beliefs that, only later on, kind of coalesces into a religion. And it's centered on the belief in kami which is spelled K-A-M-I. And that's sort of like kami is the spirit that lives in things. And stones and trees have all sorts of kami.

Noel: She shows us another big black ornamental stone and sticks a magnet to it. It's a piece of magnetite.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: I was like, talk about a stone with some Kami. (laughs)

Noel: Then, Dr. Clark says she has something else to show us. She digs around through some cabinets and pulls out a picture of the barracks at Amache.

[sound of paper rustling]

Dr. Bonnie Clark: And you can see just the sand everywhere, everywhere. I'd like you to look at that.

Tyler: Uh-huh. That's a bonsai tree.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: Sitting outside the barracks is what appears to be a bonsai tree, planted in a coffee pot.

Noel: It's hard to tell if it's ACTUALLY a bonsai, or just a small tree. And when Dr. Clark looks up the names of the people who lived in those barracks, we don't recognize them as any of the founding members of the Denver Bonsai Club.

Tyler: But it sure LOOKS like a bonsai.

Noel: We go back to Dr. Clark's office, to talk to her about ornamental gardening in the camps, including bonsai.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: She says about 60 percent of the people of Japanese ancestry living in the U.S. at the time were working in some sort of horticultural field. And she tells us a story about a woman who came to work on one of her digs. Her family had been at Amache.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: and I was talking to her about how we have so many gardens. She said “Well, we're Japanese, we grow things, that's what we do”.

Noel: Dr. Clark talked to us about the importance of the concept of placemaking. The incarcerated often used whatever available materials they could find to make traditional Japanese art: broken water pipes and cinder blocks, asbestos tiles from the barracks, etc.

Tyler: She said that gardening was especially important for the incarcerated because it was a way to make sure their children grew up with an appreciation for the beauty of nature despite the barren landscape that surrounded them.

Noel: But gardening was far from the ONLY traditional art being practiced in these camps.

Dr. Bonnie Clark: They were clearly not in control and they weren't going to be, but they had these skills derived over centuries about how to bring balance to the world through art, through things like painting, through writing poetry, through gardening, theater, music.

[Music fades in]

Dr. Bonnie Clark: These are all ways that you can express your traditions and your talents and also just make the world a livable place. I think this is a situation where art is not optional.

Noel: Traditional Japanese arts became important to the incarcerated, especially because of attempts to restrict expressions of their language, culture, and religions.

Tyler: But even though the arts thrived in the camps, the incarceration also undermined Japanese culture and family structure.

Noel: Hanako Wakatsuki told us the camps even provided “Americanization classes” for incarcerated, especially the older people in the camps who couldn’t work.

[Music fades out]

Hanako Wakatsuki: And that was an opportunity for the government to just try to indoctrinate people into American ideals in a sense. So some of it was language classes, some of it was civics classes. But then, eventually, they start to allow Japanese traditional cultural practices.

Tyler: Once they were allowed to practice their traditional art forms, the incarcerated started using the materials available to them in that barren American landscape.

Naomi Hirahara: I do think there’s an added irony and poignancy by using things in an area that has imprisoned you.

Noel: This is Naomi Hirahara again.

Naomi Hirahara: The thing about Japanese culture even back in Japan is there's always this recognition that nature is essential, like that's... Most Japanese names refer to something of nature. So, of course they naturally gravitated towards bringing those things into this area, that was many times very stark and flat and not beautiful at all.

Noel: Hanako Wakatsuki agrees.

Hanako Wakatsuki: People were taken away from their homes and then they're just like literally dumped off in the middle of nowhere and trying to figure out what's next. Because the government wasn't really communicating with them to be like "OK, you know, you're going to be here for X amount of time." There was none of that. So, in some of the oral histories people are like we thought we're just dropped off in hell, you know, in a sense. So, the aspect of being able to do these beautification projects helps with the psychological trauma that was actually going on and the PTSD.

Tyler: But we still wanted to know more about bonsai specifically, so we met up with Robert Baran.

Noel: Robert lives in Colorado Springs. He's a fastidious amateur historian and a lifelong bonsai enthusiast. He's been researching bonsai for over THIRTY YEARS and has a website called magiminiland.org. That's short for --

Robert Baran: magical miniature landscapes.

Tyler: Robert's website is AMAZING. It looks like something straight out of the 90's: with page after page of text hyperlinks and sprawling blog posts. It's like a Wikipedia JUST for bonsai and other... well,

Robert Baran: magical miniature landscapes.

Noel: It has an astonishing amount of information from the research he's done over the last three decades.

Tyler: He told us a story from his website about a woman named Kunsen Ninomiya who was incarcerated at Amache.

Robert Baran: When she got to the camp it was during a sandstorm that lasted a few days and she was thinking you know there's - there's gotta be a bright side to this. There's got to be something to do with all this sand that's around. So she remembered she had learned this inanimate three dimensional landscape art bonkei. B-O-N-K-E-I.

Noel: She got pieces of an old vegetable crate and started using the sand that covered everything in sight to make these miniature landscapes.

Tyler: And before long, other incarceratedees wanted to learn as well.

Robert Baran: And within a few months they had ninety-two students, and only one person had ever done this before. By 1943, they put on the first of two or three shows in the camp. This was probably the largest display of bonkei in the western world, up to that point.

Noel: A lot of those bonkei pieces featured depictions of distinctly Japanese landscapes.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: This anecdote seemed like the perfect illustration of what was quickly becoming one of the most interesting parts of this story to us: the use of whatever materials the incarcerated could find to create traditional Japanese art that reminded them of home.

Noel: Everyone we talked to agreed that a huge variety of traditional arts were practiced in the camps. But we hadn't heard anyone talk much about Bonsai SPECIFICALLY.

Tyler: So we asked Robert.

Robert Baran: Well, there is an article from the 70's that I came across. At one of the camps. I think in California, a Japanese resident escaped and went out a few hundred yards to get this one - I think was a creosote bush - that he'd been looking at through the fence at a distance, and smuggled it back in because he thought it had the right characteristics to make a nice bonsai composition.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: After we met with Robert, he sent us a paper written by Thomas S. Elias. He's the one who told us the story about Frank Nagata and his car full of bonsai trees at the beginning of the episode.

Noel: Again, unlike most incarcerated who were allowed only what they could carry, Frank had been allowed to load up his Ford Model A when they left their home in Los Angeles.

Tyler: According to his daughter, Kay Komai, Frank, his friend Morihei Furuya, and their teacher, Sam Doi, eventually managed to bring several bonsai with them to Amache. They continued their mentorship, AND...

Thomas Elias: They actually had a little exhibit there, a display.

Tyler: The article claims that THAT show, may have been one of the first EVER bonsai exhibitions in the United states

Noel: And these three men would go on to become major figures in re-establishing bonsai practice in the United States when they moved back to Los Angeles after the incarceration ended.

Thomas Elias: Doi and Nagata and Furuya, his friend, were very instrumental in promoting bonsai in California immediately after the war, and they were teaching other people, like John Naka who rose to prominence in North American bonsai was learning from them.

Noel: John Naka would become one of the pioneers of using North American trees for bonsai and teaching it to people who weren't Japanese. AND he was originally from Colorado before he moved to California.

Tyler: But still, none of the three men who allegedly put on the bonsai exhibition at Amache appeared to have anything to do with the Denver Bonsai Club.

[Music fades in then out to underwriting]

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[Music fades in then out to Noel narrating]

Noel: On December 18, 1944, the United States Supreme Court handed down TWO decisions that effectively shut down the Japanese concentration camps. Most of them were closed by the end of 1945. The last one closed in 1946.

Hanako Wakatsuki: After the closure of the camps, the government provided twenty five dollars and a one-way ticket, whether it's on bus or train, for people to rebuild their lives. And the majority of the West Coast was opened up to resettlement. But the government had this process

of resettlement that was basically trying to move the Japanese American population off the West Coast because the government felt that that was an economic threat, to then basically create a larger diaspora of the Japanese American community.

Noel: This is Hanako Wakatsuki again.

Hanako Wakatsuki: So they didn't have homes to even go back to, you know? So that's why the government "provided" (and I'm going to use air quotes) "opportunities", which was strategically to try to break up the Japanese American populations on the West Coast because they're like, "You know what? We don't want them to have influence in large numbers like how they did before the war", in a sense.

Noel: Despite being unwelcome there, some of the incarcerated went back to the West Coast . Others moved to the Midwest and the East Coast, and some of them settled in Colorado.

Tyler: But finding a place to settle was just the beginning. Most people leaving the camps had to start from scratch.

Hanako Wakatsuki: It was hard for people because, you know, a lot of the older folks, they still couldn't work because if they had a profession they lost it. Like my family was in the fishing industry. The boats were repossessed. My family has not gone back into the fishing industry and it's been like several generations later. This incarceration took a lot from people.

Dr. William Wei: And then they tried to start their lives over again, under those circumstances. And Colorado, especially with the welcome that Carr had offered, was an obvious place to go. Which is one of the reasons why the Japanese American community here, in the aftermath of World War II, grew significantly in size.

Noel: Americans of Japanese ancestry who moved to Colorado during the VOLUNTARY relocation period were NOT incarcerated. So many people who WERE incarcerated had friends and family already living in Colorado.

Tyler: But despite Governor Carr's attempts to create a welcoming environment, Japanese Americans leaving the camps still faced discrimination. Here's Hanako.

Hanako Wakatsuki: There was actually a sociological study that was done immediately after the war where they're like hey how do you feel being in the Denver area, Do you feel accepted? And it was kind of a mixed bag, where some people were like, I really want to go back to L.A., or I want to go back to Seattle. You know, my brother, cousin, what not, is over in Chicago. We're hoping to see if that's a better opportunity than what exists here. But then there's some people in Brighton, Colorado who's like, You know what? I feel really good. The community is welcoming

Noel: Bob Fuchigami and his family were among those who decided to stay in Colorado. They wound up living in a small house in Greeley.

Bob Fuchigami: And then we had to find something for my father to do because while we were in Amache he had been a supervisor on the farm and the truck that they would ride from Amache out to the farms. My father fell off and broke his back. So he never really recovered from that. We finally built a little grocery store. And he operated that.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: We had been told that the 8 founding members of the original Denver Bonsai Club ALSO settled in Denver after being released from the concentration camps. But when we checked the National Archives database of all the people who had been incarcerated, we had a difficult time verifying that information.

Noel: Of the 8 members, we only know 7 of their names -- George Fukuma, Shiichi Fukuhara , Ben Yamakishi, Sam Naka, George Inai, Kai Kawahara, and Mitsutaro Tawara, all ended up in Denver after the war, and they started the Denver Bonsai Club.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: What we DO know, is that as those eight men rebuilt their lives here in Colorado, they began incorporating new trees - COLORADO TREES - into their bonsai practice. Using native species has always been a part of practicing bonsai, in part because that's what's usually available. But the use of North American trees for bonsai exploded after the camps closed.

Noel: The Denver Bonsai Club also had to deal with the fact that the climate in Colorado is way different than the West Coast. As Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society historian Patrick Allen said...

Patrick Allen: Yeah, you have to do some adaptation to accommodate what we have here locally.

Noel: From its beginnings in China, the art of bonsai has always been about adaptation to constrictive environments.

Tyler: And like any art form, it's evolved and changed over time.

Dr. William Wei: bonsai was originally a Chinese art form, one that had been practiced for many centuries.

Noel: This is William Wei again. He, and Robert Baran both told us that Bonsai migrated from China to Japan along with Buddhism around 800 years ago, before slowly appearing in other parts of the world.

Tyler: Each new country that started practicing bonsai put their own spin on it as they learned the craft and adapted it for their native species.

Noel: And it will continue to adapt, evolve, and change as students, no matter what language they speak, continue to fall in love with these "magical miniature landscapes."

Tyler: Harold Sasaki, a member of both the Japanese and English speaking clubs, told us about one of those students right here in Colorado.

Harold Sasaki: I have a early student that lived in Glenwood Springs. His name is Ryan Neil, and his skill level was just absolutely out of the stratosphere. And there's two or three current members of the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society studying under him.

Tyler: Ryan Neil did a grueling, 6-year apprenticeship in Japan with Masahiko Kimura, one of the best bonsai artists in the WORLD. He now runs his own bonsai facility in Oregon called Bonsai Mirai.

Noel: He was just 12 years old when he fell in love with bonsai.

Ryan Neil: It was almost like spontaneous combustion and you know from that point forward my every waking moment was spent thinking about bonsai.

Tyler: Eventually, he found Harold Sasaki's bonsai nursery in the Denver phone book and started studying with him.

Noel: He was inspired by Sasaki's approach.

Ryan Neil: and the perception of bonsai being you have to be using Japanese species and Harold is using native North American collected material.

Tyler: Ryan's obsession with bonsai never waned. Only a month after graduating with a degree in horticulture from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, he moved to Japan to do a six year apprenticeship with Mr Kimura.

Ryan Neil: Mr. Kimura's had 90 some apprentices, I think 14 have finished.

Noel: Mr. Kimura's bonsai collection required care at all hours of day and night.

Ryan Neil: And that was, that was grueling. I mean it was a lot of, there was a lot of verbal reprimand. There was a lot of mental warfare. Occasionally, the older apprentices would engage in physical reprimand.

Tyler: But Ryan stuck with it, and eventually finished his apprenticeship.

Noel: When he came back to the United States, he wrestled a lot with the idea of cultural appropriation and how he could adapt the traditional art form of Bonsai to HIS experience and culture while still respecting its origins.

Tyler: He turned to the example of Harold Sasaki and the Denver Bonsai Club for inspiration.

Ryan Neil: you had this generation of Japanese Americans that were displaced and, and then came back to or continued with the practice of bonsai as a preservation of a culture that was largely, potentially removed from them or taken away for a period of time, causing some sort of massive identity shift, and bonsai became this anchor for them, and that's really special.

[music fades in]

Tyler: We probably won't ever know for sure why the two bonsai clubs in Denver failed to merge.

Noel: Those original members of the Japanese speaking club didn't keep minutes or any other records that we could find, and none of the people who knew them could tell us.

Tyler: And as we did more research, it started to look like the conflict between the two clubs wasn't much of a conflict at all. Not only was the English speaking club STARTED as a way for non-Japanese speakers to learn bonsai, but the two clubs still work closely together.

Noel: In the end, it probably doesn't matter. The more we learned about how much traditional Japanese art forms had meant to those incarcerated in the camps, the clearer it became: Preserving and practicing their culture was an essential part of how they survived this incredibly traumatic chapter in American history.

Tyler: And that desire to PRESERVE their culture seemed to be a more likely explanation for the failed merger than any effort to EXCLUDE anyone.

Noel: In other words, it's not hard to imagine how meaningful it would have been for the former prisoners to have a space where they could just...BE JAPANESE.

Tyler: Ryan Neil told us about some colleagues of his that experienced this firsthand.

Ryan Neil: They would say: Listen: after World War 2 we would be eating with chopsticks while we were sitting at the dinner table. And if somebody rang the doorbell we would put the chopsticks away and get out forks because we didn't know who was at the door and we didn't want them to know that we were still participating in our traditional cultural values.

Tyler: He also said that his own bonsai practice can be traced back to camps like Amache.

Ryan Neil: When you look back at the original pioneers of bonsai in North America the internment camp being in Colorado even influenced the original Southern California bonsai practitioners that went back to California and started collecting California Junipers out of Jawbone Canyon in the Mojave Desert. They still reference Colorado as a source of inspiration even being in California. And you see Harold and the community in Denver continuing to facilitate the growth of younger bonsai artists and practitioners both in the collecting model and the use of that material artistically in a different way. And that obviously influenced me.

Noel: And Ryan says he's never lost his interest in working with native Colorado species to create bonsai that look like the landscapes that have always meant the most to him.

Ryan Neil: Where a lot of my creations are born from are my experiences as a kid going fishing on the flat tops, walking out out my back door, hiking up the mountain, and seeing the Junipers with their you know, gnarly, dead, twisted trunks and the forms they took, the granite slabs of the eastern slope where the Ponderosas grow and sort of meander along that granite, and I

think Colorado formed my first *real* abstracted interpretation of the form of trees in the natural environment and trying to pay homage to those environments in my creations.

[Music fades out]

[Denver Botanic Gardens ambient sounds]

Tyler: Back at the Denver Botanic Gardens, I go to a workshop hosted by the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society. Almost everyone here is working on trees that are native to Colorado. And as far as I can tell, Gary Matsuda, who we heard from earlier, is the only person of Japanese descent in the room. I make the rounds and talk to them about what drew them to bonsai. Andy Berry, the current president of the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society, tells me how he was inspired by the natural landscapes in Colorado.

Andy Berry: We grow up with these trees around us right. I mean we can, you know, drive 20 minutes to the mountains and see how Mother Nature treats these trees. And I think we take a lot of cues from that.

Tyler: A lot of the people at the workshop tell me similar things: That they're inspired by the resilience of these trees that have been stunted by harsh conditions in the wild. Another theme that emerges as I'm talking to people is that taking care of these centuries-old trees is an extremely mindful practice.

Dave Regan: Absolutely, I mean, this is waking meditation to me.

Tyler: This is Dave Regan. He works as a tattoo artist here in Denver, and he tells me about how the mindfulness of taking care of a bonsai tree has helped him through hard times. Many of the people at the workshop have mentioned similar things throughout the morning: Bonsai has helped them cope with being laid off, housing issues and legal troubles, PTSD... I can't help but notice some parallels to the trees themselves.

Dave Regan: So, you know, you understand the amount of torture and suffering that these trees go through sometimes, you know hundreds or even thousands of years, in order to take the shapes that they take. And so, you know, you see that and like there's a branch broken here. What made that branch break, was that high winds? Was it an animal? You know, we have... Gary has a tree here, you can see the hole that's opened up on the side of his tree, that was on a jeep trail. And you know the tire knocks it and opens it up. But I mean that's all part of how these things end up becoming what they are.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: I don't want to take the metaphor too far here. There's nothing beautiful or poignant about a prison camp. But as I think about the similarities between these trees and the people who take care of them, it reminds me of something Ryan Neil said about the influence of the camps on the way Bonsai is practiced today.

Ryan Neil: Whether I went to Japan, whether I studied in Southern California, whether I go to the East Coast and practice bonsai right now, Colorado, the Rocky Mountains, and the work of

those original pioneers pursuing bonsai in Colorado in the very early days from the internment camps is still at the epicenter of bonsai culture in North America and spreading around the world with the influence of the creations that are being generated as a result of that.

[Music fades out]

[Music]

Credits:

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Noel: Thanks finally to the entire at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black,

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

[Music fades out]