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Coast Leaders Act to Control Racial Discrimination California Treatment of Nisei Improves While Oregon Lags

By Carey McWilliams

In Gresham, Oregon—near Portland—an organization known as the Oregon Property Owners League has been formed for the purpose of “keeping the Japanese out of Gresham” and, eventually, of securing legislation for the deportation of all persons of Japanese descent. This organization did not seem to be making much headway until two professional organizers suddenly appeared on the scene.

These organizers, Art Ritchie, former editor of the *Seattle Star*, and A. E. McCroskey, have opened headquarters in the Multnomah Hotel in Portland and are busily engaged in recruiting members (with a membership fee of \$10 and monthly dues of \$1). To date some 600 members have been enrolled.

At public meetings sponsored by the Gresham organization, the stage has been decorated with large-sized photographs depicting acts of savagery committed by the Japanese against Americans in the Pacific; and an ex-Marine, in uniform, usually appears and recites an obviously well-rehearsed piece.

One of the promoters involved in this race-baiting organization, Art Ritchie, has had considerable experience in promotional activities. Not so long ago, he was trying to sell municipalities on the idea of building “war memorials.” When this particular promotion did not seem to strike fire, he began selling busts of President Roosevelt to local Democratic Clubs. And when this promotion also failed to assume spectacular proportions, he apparently decided to have a fling at anti-evacuee agitation.

With the appearance of Messrs. Ritchie and McCroskey it is apparent, as the *Portland Oregonian* recently pointed out, that organized anti-evacuee activity has lost its amateur standing.

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Realizing the danger involved in permitting such organized and professionally promoted activity to continue unchallenged, a group of distinguished citizens held a mass meeting in Gresham early in March at which a policy of fair play was advocated. Among the speakers were former Gov. Charles Sprague and E. B. McNaughton, president of the First National Bank of Portland.

At about the same time, the Multnomah Bar Association appointed a special committee to protect the constitutional rights of returning evacuees. Unfortunately, however, this counter-campaign was not launched soon enough to prevent the enactment of discriminatory legislation in Oregon.

On the last day of the session, the Oregon Legislature, by a vote of 55 to 2, enacted an Alien Land Act designed to prevent alien Japanese from living on or using land purchased in the name of a relative. Since the bill carried an emergency rider, it went into effect immediately upon being signed by Gov. Earl Snell (who actively sponsored the bill) on Mar. 27. While the measure is probably unconstitutional, it will have the effect of making it difficult for evacuees to re-engage in agricultural production in Oregon. The act represents the first and only piece of discriminatory legislation passed on the West Coast since the Army's order of Dec. 17.

While there have been more "incidents" in California since Dec. 17 than in either Washington or Oregon, the general situation shows marked and steady improvement. For the incidents which have occurred seem to have provoked a general reaction in favor of the evacuees.

Following the attempted burning of the home of Sumio Dio near Auburn, Cal., on Jan. 18, for example, a local fair-play committee was formed in the county.

Throughout the state, in fact, public opinion has tended to support the evacuees. Gov. Earl Warren correctly appraised the situation when, on Jan. 29, he informed his cabinet that "a majority opinion in California supports the right of Americans of Japanese ancestry to return to their homes."

Five Types

Under the leadership of Attorney General Robert W. Kenny, local law enforcement officials have been doing a good job. On Mar. 16, the Attorney General told the sheriffs of California, assembled in Sacramento, what he expected of them in vigorous, unequivocal, and hard-hitting terms.

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Five types of persons, he said, are involved in anti-evacuee agitation.

¶ Those who are admittedly prejudiced on the score of race.

¶ "Hoodlum elements" frequently approaching draft age.

¶ Professional inciters to violence.

¶ "Jap Baiters" of the type who, in the language of the Attorney General, "want to fight not in the jungle, or on a beachhead against regular troops, but safely at home against defenseless old men, women and children."

¶ "Last and most vicious, those who cover their selfish economic interested with a pretense of patriotic motive."

In fact, these are the elements that, throughout the West Coast, are seeking to cause trouble. They are definitely a minority element, even in the localities where incidents have occurred.

No Success

To date they have not succeeded in forming a single compact organization; nor have they directly involved the major mass organizations of the region in their activities. The problem is to keep these elements constantly on the defensive. For this strategy to succeed, the majority must be organized in favor of fair-play. For when the majority is not organized, it is always possible for these troublesome elements to engineer the adoption of discriminatory legislation; to stir up trouble; to inspire boycott movements; to undermine majority sentiment.

Legislators are frequently afraid to oppose these elements since they assume, in the absence of information to the contrary, that they actually represent majority opinion.

Now is the crucial time on the West Coast. If the forces in favor of fair play will speak out boldly, if they will take a firm position and then organize to defend this position, they can easily isolate and eventually destroy these provocative organized groups.

The small fires of prejudice and antagonism which exist on the West Coast today can be quickly extinguished; but if these fires are permitted to smolder they can become dangerous in the postwar period. Since few of the people who oppose the return of the evacuees are motivated by economic considerations, many of them can be drawn away from this incipient agitation. The rural areas generally are more susceptible to this agitation than the urban areas (where the bulk of the population resides).

But, even in rural areas, many people oppose the return of the evacuees primarily because it is

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"the thing to do,"—a means of improving one's status, a technique by which one can become identified with large shipper-grower interests. Ignoring the rural-urban difference, public opinion on the West Coast divides somewhat as follows: about 20 per cent of the people actively oppose the return of the evacuees, about 20 per cent actively favor their return, and the remaining 60 per cent are either indifferent or inclined to be fair.

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