

Grandpa and Walter-McCarran

In 1952, Mike Masaoka, Washington lobbyist for the Japanese American Citizens League, pushed through Congress the Walter-McCarran Act, which gave first generation immigrant Issei the right to become naturalized American citizens. For more than 162 years before passage, the Japanese were not eligible to become citizens.

The Issei were thrilled, so thrilled that they raised money and sent Mike and his whole family on a round the world cruise.

Then nearly all the Issei began to study booklets about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the three branches of government, in order to answer questions on the naturalization exam. Nearly all of them, especially the women, were wonderfully conscientious students.

But Grandpa was not and said:

“I don’t want that piece of paper. I’ve built up this valley for forty years, and those white people here did nothing. They had the paper all along and I didn’t. I don’t want it.”

I said:

“Okay, Grandpa.”

About ten years later, Grandpa said:

“Masashi-san, I’ve been thinking. Maybe I should have that paper. If I don’t have it, maybe it will hurt your future.

I said:

“Grandpa, it’s not going to hurt my future.

Grandpa said:

“I still want to have it just in case. But I not going to study for it like all the Issei women reading the little booklets, and reading some more and talking to themselves. They try to memorize everything. I am not going to read those booklets. I am never going to do that.

And so the day comes when the Immigration Officer arrives in Worland, Wyoming, and Grandpa is the only person scheduled to take the test. At 84, he was entitled to take an oral test. I go with Grandpa, to help with translation and maybe help a little with an answer or two. In small office in the local court house, the three of us sit down.

The first question Immigration Officer asks:

“Okay, Mr. Ujifusa, what does the United States Congress do?

Grandpa does not know the answer.

The Immigration Officer asks a second question:

“Mr. Ujifusa, what does the Supreme Court do?

Grandpa does not know the answer.

The Immigration Officer then asks:

“Mr. Ujifusa, what are the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution called?

Grandpa does not know the answer.

Finally the Immigration Officer asks:

“Mr. Ujifusa, who was the first president of the United States?

Grandpa says, *A re wa (I point to) George Washington.*

The Immigration Officer says:

You Pass.

I have Grandpa’s citizenship paper, complete with his photo, framed and hung above the desk where I helped to write 14 editions of *The Almanac of American Politics*. It’s a book about what Congress does.