Garbed in white robe, pointed cap, and crimson-and purple-bordered cape, Ku Klux Klan field representative Tyler A. Rogers stood before some 500 to 600 Yakima Valley residents in his hometown of Wapato to describe "Ideals and Principles" of the Klan. No baiting of minorities was reported that night of March 14, 1923, so evidence that the Klan became involved in the effort then under way to remove Japanese Americans from the Yakima Indian Reservation is only circumstantial. But it would have been surprising if Klan members in the Yakima Valley, individually if not corporately, had not challenged the Japanese Americans. On the Pacific Coast the Klan's "chameleon nature" manifest itself in anti-Japanese activity, just as in the Southwest it was anti-Mexican, anti-Catholic in the Midwest, and anti-Semitic on the Atlantic Coast.

The Klan was only one new group in 1923 drawn to the issue of leasing reservation land to Japanese Americans. The Grange went on record against the Issei and Nisei (Japanese immigrants and their children), and a wider circle of citizens became active, culminating in a mass meeting of some 1,000 persons later in March. It all seemed to indicate that the Japanese Americans had been successful in circumventing the letter of the state's anti-alien land law, or at least in postponing its effects.

The Klan's recruitment drive in Wapato, Toppenish, Yakima, Grandview and Sunnyside in the Yakima Valley was part of its accelerated growth across America in the early 1920s. The Klan fed nationally on the nativism of the post-World War I period, and membership peaked at four million in 1924. Its estimated strength in Washington reached 35,000 to 40,000 in 42 Klaverns. Yet it never achieved the influence in Washington that it had in Oregon, where it successfully supported the abolition of parochial education in 1922 and in 1923 dominated the legislature that passed an anti-alien land law. But even in Wapato its shadowy influence is credited with deciding a school board election in 1925 in which Japanese Americans indirectly were an issue.

The Wapato rally was the second of at least four held in the Yakima Valley during March 1923 that collectively attracted several thousand people. The first was held March 1 in Toppenish, the same week that some 500 attended a similar meeting in Grandview to the south. Because the Yakima First Christian Church denied facilities for that city's March 22 rally, a crowd of over 2,000 packed Yakima's Capitol Theatre to hear the Reverend C. C. Curtis of Vancouver Washington, "exalted cyclops" of the Columbia River Klan.

Newspaper coverage of the Klan rallies organized by Rogers is curious at best. For example, neither of the Yakima newspapers nor the Wapato Independent carried stories in advance of the Wapato meeting; the 500 to 600 participants apparently learned about the talk by word of mouth or from placards posted around town.
Neither did the Yakima and Wapato newspapers editorialize about the massive organizational effort under way in the "more or less secret sessions" that preceded the public rallies. W. W. Robertson's Yakima Daily Republic reported only that "considerable sentiment" for and against the Klan had developed in the Grandview area. At the time of the big Yakima rally, the Yakima Morning Herald observed in its news columns that the crowd was one of the "most cosmopolitan" that had attended a lecture there. It described a scene in which prominent Yakima residents sat next to people in dirty and greasy clothes. Nearly as many women as men were in the audience, as were a large number of children and "a few Negroes and Japanese."

The Klan gave institutional racism another partner in the Yakima Valley, but it was a more elusive presence than that of the American Legion, which William Verran, Jr. of the Wapato Independent reported from the inside as a member. Despite the Klan's continuing agenda, including the school board race two years later, the Independent told of only one more Klan meeting. Rev. C. C. Curtis returned to the valley in April and told approximately 225 persons at the Wapato International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) hall that the four principles of the Klan were the Protestant Christian faith, America for Americans, supremacy of the white race, and woman in her place and her chastity protected by every God-fearing man.

Amidst three (electric) burning crosses and fireworks, Klan activity in Central Washington culminated on August 9, 1924, in a field south of Yakima. Seven hundred initiates marched with 1,000 robed members before an estimated 40,000 spectators in a statewide installation ceremony in a field after officials in Olympia denied the Klan use of the state fairgrounds in Yakima. The spectacle was a marked contrast to the disintegration of the Yakima Valley Klan during the following two years.

When the national Klan banished Rogers from its membership on May 23, 1925, he installed himself as president of the National Organization of the Allied Patmos Patriots of the United States of America. He claimed that the Sunnyside Klan was then the only chapter remaining in the valley. The situation deteriorated beyond recovery when the Wapato resident, sued by the Klan, refused to turn over membership lists, records, robes and paraphernalia.

Even if the Klan had folded, the Issei could see the threat inherent in the sentiment of a KKK crowd so large that 35 acres and three miles of roadway were necessary to accommodate its vehicles. If burning crosses symbolized racism among private citizens, the Japanese Americans could take scant comfort in policies of the federal government.

Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall confirmed early in 1923 that presidential policy prohibited alien leases on the Yakima Indian Reservation, and the practice would not be affected by his resignation on March 4. He recognized the industry and patriotism of the Japanese Americans and their effective role in development of the Yakima Indian Reservation. Yet, he said, he also respected the feeling of Caucasians about the advisability of continued leasing to "Japs," not being influenced by the financial returns they could provide to the community or the Indians. I am positively and absolutely opposed to the acquisition of any of the remaining public lands of the United States by aliens. This response won warm praise from representatives of the 19 Yakima Valley American Legion posts who met in February, expressing the hope that future generations of Americans would appraise his work "at its true worth and honor him accordingly."

Even as federal officials were carrying out their policies, the 1923 state legislature in Olympia again acceded to the admitted pressure of the American Legion, if indeed any was necessary, to tighten the anti-alien land law. For example, an amendment provided that if a minor child of an alien held title to land, the title was presumed to be held in trust for the parent. The measure passed the House 89-6 on February 16 and the Senate 39-0 on February 28.
Legislation was less important than leases to the Scripps' Seattle Star on March 2, which, in a head-line atop page one, had the "Japs Moving Out as Leases Expire." The story said the "vast main of body of Japanese-American farmers had begun leaving the Yakima Valley in a "general exodus" to Puget Sound logging camps and the ranches of Montana. Four hundred leases held by the farmers had expired on March 1, the story said and most of the leaseholders "immediately vacated" the land, leaving only 75 to 100 remaining:

As the Japs board trains at Wapato and Toppenish with their bags and bundles or clatter out of town in their antiquated flivvers a spirit of satisfaction is plainly evident among the white citizenry, particularly the exservicemen, whose insistence that the Japs be removed [led] to the Fall exclusion order.

The story was wrong in at least two respects. If such an exodus of bundles and flivvers had taken place, why were the Wapato legionnaires still determined to carry on the fight? And why were so many of the former leaseholders going to Montana if, as the Star reported just the next day, that state had also passed anti-alien land legislation? The truth was that leases had expired and some Japanese Americans had left, but the unnamed reporter was too anxious to convey the scent of victory and depict a word picture of dilapidated caravans to delve into the complexities of subleases and other legal devices. It was with no apparent sense of contradiction that exactly two weeks later the Star, again on the front page, said, "Japs Cling to Yakima Lands."

The headline was precipitated by Wapato legionnaires who traveled to Seattle to "obtain reinforcements in the fight." Specifically, they wanted speakers for a March 28 mass meeting in Wapato, and Seattle councilman Philip Tindall and King County deputy prosecutor Ewing Colvin agreed to address Yakima Valley citizens. C. A. Norton, commander of the Wapato American Legion post, won sympathy in Seattle and front page space in the Star when he said the situation on the reservation had become intolerable. "We've won our fight...yet we still have the Japs with us."

Norton said they either stayed on the land after their leases expired, or they acquired other land in violation of the law. He claimed it was practically impossible to get convictions because of lack of evidence. "In the first place, it's so hard to identify a Jap." Secondly, he said, apathy by United States citizens, contributed to the problem, hence the purpose of the meeting to arouse public sentiment.

Tindall and Colvin traveled to Wapato for the meeting, and so did Seattle Star reporter Bob Bermann. On the day of the meeting the headline "YAKIMA VALLEY IN JAP WAR!" was spread eight columns across the Star's front page, above the newspaper's name plate. In the lead story Bermann stated that the purpose of that evening's meeting was to organize the Yakima Valley into a great army of volunteer investigators, each of whom would make it his business to gather evidence against "Japs" and unscrupulous whites.

Alex McCredy, a Wapato banker and Ford automobile dealer, told Bermann he could find no better words than those used by Seattle publisher Miller Freeman in a letter McCredy had received just that day. Success or failure of the national "Japanese problem" depended on the outcome of the Yakima Indian Reservation case, Freeman said, because it set a precedent for action of "our people and of the federal government." McCredy said the Japanese Americans paid unscrupulous Caucasians to obtain leases and then turned the property over to them, in one case offering a $1,000 fee. "Fortunately, this white man was too good an American to accept the offer, but I am sorry to say others have not been so scrupulous."

Bermann spent the day of the mass meeting talking to Wapato residents to further the Star's own "Yellow Peril" agenda and inform Seattle readers about what drew their councilman and deputy prosecutor out of town. The next day the fruits of Bermann's enterprising reporting stood next to the meeting story under a common five-column front page headline, "Yakima Valley Unites to Oust Jap Invaders." "Wapato City
Divided into Two Cliques," read the deck headline over his interview story, which called Wapato the storm center of the war on the Yakima Indian Reservation to drive out "the Japs." Bermann said the town had taken on the appearance "almost literally" of two armed camps. The impression throughout the state of unanimous anti-Japanese sentiment in Wapato was erroneous, he said. While the "anti-Jap" agitators were in the majority, he called the Japanese-Americans' allies numerous and powerful.

This balance of forces would have been news to readers of the Wapato Independent, who had been treated, and would continue to be treated, only to the American Legion side of the issue, Allied with the legionnaires, Bermann said, was a "fairly representative" group of businessmen led by McCredy, who was president of the First National Bank and "probably the wealthiest man for miles around." Also categorized in this group were all the common people as present or prospective Caucasian renters of reservation land, and a few Indians who were angered by the unfair treatment they had received at the hands of same Japanese Americans.

Sympathetic to the Japanese Americans were at least 50 percent of the businessmen in the town, led by W. N. Luby and A. C. Ness, president and vice president, respectively, of the Union State Bank, Bermann wrote. A majority of the Indians were also sympathetic, not considering "the racial aspect of the case at all; they merely recognize the fact that yellow tenants by reason of their lower standard of living can pay higher rents than the whites." The reporter also put a "certain portion" of the government employees on the reservation with the Japanese Americans, "the only construction that one can place upon the blatant way in which they are permitting violations and evasions of the [Interior] departmental ruling."

Feeling was running high on both sides, Bermann wrote, with "anti-Jap" workers charging that Japanese-American sympathizers were actuated entirely by greed, willing to sellout their children's in exchange for dollars from the illegal leases. On the other hand, the pro-Japanese citizens asserted that the agitation was being magnified, stemming partly from business rivalry and partly from political ambitions, shortchanging the Issei in the process.

C. J. Luby of the Wapato Trading Company was quoted as saying that the Japanese Americans eventually had to go. "But I am in favor of moderate methods, and I do think that the Japs should be given a square deal." He said that for 15 years the community had been catering to these "Japs," patting them on their backs and taking their dollars. "It doesn't seem exactly fair to kick them out now; we ought to sort of ease them out." Compounding the problem was the fact that crops had been bad for two years. To eject them summarily then meant that not only they would lose everything but local businessmen would lose thousands of dollars that could never be collected, Luby said.

A less conservative stand was taken by A. C. Ness who, in addition to being vice president of the Union State Bank, was president of Wapato Orchards Company. He said the agitators reminded him of a lot of coyotes running down a poor little rabbit. He claimed there was nothing patriotic about it all, just business jealousy and the desire of one man, unnamed, to get a lot of notoriety for political purposes. Ness said he did not think it was nice or patriotic of the American Legion to push the issue while ignoring "the poor old Indians" who would be robbed if "the Japs" were driven out. The Issei paid more rent than "the Americans" were willing to offer—and, since the rent was all the money the Indians had to live on, "it seems to me that they have some right to say whom they shall rent to. The Japs will settle on land no white man can make a living out of."

Alex McCredy told the reporter that the issue was not a local crisis but one affecting the state and the nation. He claimed to have no personal interest in the fight, that the "Jap menace" could never affect him personally during his lifetime. But it could affect "our children and it's them that we're fighting for." He called evading the law so Wapato businessmen would not lose money "poppycock. Of course they'll lose
money." He claimed to have already written his loss off his books and had forgotten about it. "For three years I haven't loaned a penny to a Jap."

Bermann and his editors were so taken with the Wapato conflict even before the mass meeting that they promised Seattle readers a continuing series of articles "on conditions in and around Wapato." Any Wapato readers of the Star, too, would have seen in print for the first time the rationale of opponents to the American Legion philosophy that everyone in town knew by word of mouth; it was a side of the conflict the Wapato Independent never did acknowledge.

Some 1,000 Yakima Valley residents filled the Wapato IOOF hall, including legionnaires from points between Yakima and Pasco. The Star described the meeting as one of the most enthusiastic gatherings in the history of the county. Emotions were stirred by the Yakima Elks band that paraded through the crowd as the meeting opened.

The fate of the Pacific Coast hinged on the Yakima Valley for settlement of the Japanese-American issue, Councilman Tindall told the assembled citizens. Until Secretary Fall ruled on Yakima Reservation lands, nothing had been done by the federal government since President Roosevelt's "Gentlemen's Agreement," he said, adding that the Japanese did not think in terms of 10 or 25 years, but in terms of 100 years when thousands of American-born Japanese would be voters "and possessed of the same rights and privileges as you and I."

Colvin, the King County Deputy Prosecutor, was identified as the first person to secure a conviction under the anti-foreign land law. He said,

I hope Wapato will be a Lexington of 1923, that something will be started tonight that will be heard in Washington. The two races, white and yellow, cannot mix. They cannot live together on the same land without friction. This problem will be settled. Shall we take it in time now by peaceful and lawful means or leave it for those who follow to settle by more harsh and more tragic means?

He predicted that without enforcement, enough Japanese would be working in the state within ten years to control the balance of power and they would line up with the party that would do their bidding. The heart of the problem, Colvin said, lay in the fact that most of the land held by the Japanese was in the names of their children, who were reared to be good subjects of the Mikado, having been sent between the ages of 7 and 18 to study in Japan. Those who could not afford overseas schooling sent their children to Japanese language schools, he said, concluding, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." That saying is just as true now as when Washington enunciated it. We want this meeting to start something on the wires that will drop like a bomb at Washington. That order of Secretary Fall's will be enforced."

Colvin urged citizens to report cases to the prosecuting attorney and be prepared to take the witness stand if necessary. He said that the final solution to the problem would be an amendment to the U. S. Constitution limiting citizenship to those whose parents were eligible for naturalization. "And make it retroactive," he concluded. "Make a further provision that [C]ongress shall pass no law or make any agreement with a foreign country by which aliens can be naturalized...unless they are of the white race."

Rhetoric of the two Seattle officials spurred the crowd that night to adopt a resolution petitioning the party-appointed Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work, to rigidly enforce his predecessor's ruling. The citizens also sought an order that the Japanese Americans be made to leave the reservation at the expiration of their leases and that evaders be declared undesirable lessees and their leases cancelled. Wired to the secretary of the interior right after the meeting, the resolution stated that Secretary Fall's ruling was being openly and defiantly disregarded and the Japanese-American population remained practically as large as ever.
The communication objected to the "veritable Japanese colony" the federal government had established on the reservation, calling it "the nucleus and foundation of a future province of the Japanese empire," the future "calamitous consequences" of which were incalculable. Issei were breeding intense Japanese nationalism into their children, who in 1922 accounted for 33 percent of the births in Wapato, the telegram claimed. All these residents could never become an integral part of "the American race" because assimilation was impossible without intermarriage, and intermarriage between American and Japanese was "unthinkable," the telegram stated.

The citizens said they were determined "at all costs" to prevent local competition from growing into international hostility. "We have no thought of employing any other than lawful and orderly means," but the Wapato residents confirmed their determination that, whatever the outcome, "the Japanese shall not stay."

With the telegram wired to Washington, D.C., Bob Bermann stayed in Wapato to keep the Star's daily series alive, producing more opinion than fact in the next front-page story which carried the headline, "Jap Invasion Called 'Bunk.'" The "bunk" referred to how supporters of Japanese Americans felt about the citizens' rationale in the telegram. "Maybe a couple of Japs" were still squatting on the reservation, but as a general practice, "there's nothing to it," the average pro-Japanese businessman allegedly told Bermann. Putting his own opinion into the story, the reporter said that minimizing the problem was a lie, as any 30-minute drive onto the reservation would reveal. "There IS something behind the agitation," he said, calling the scale of the violations a gross affront to the "entire nation." Hundreds of the Japanese Americans remained, he claimed.

As bad as the Wapato situation was, it threatened to become worse, the third article in the Star's front-page series claimed. "The devil's cauldron is boiling. Behind the shadow of the Rising Sun of Japan, which has already cast its blighting shadow upon the valley, a second and even more sinister omen is crouching." Bermann referred, of course, to the Ku Klux Klan, which he said had no hold yet in Wapato but was an indisputable presence. Anti-Japanese agitators had conducted their campaign legally to date, but they were rapidly tiring of seeing the law evaded, and impending direct action was rumored, the story said. The reporter quoted a visiting law enforcement officer who said, "We'd rather settle it with ballots than with bullets." "Certainly fertile ground for a Ku Klux organizer," the story concluded.

Bermann turned to yet another journalistic trick in his next front-page article when he told of his automobile drive through the reservation, where he witnessed dozens of Japanese-Americans working in the fields, "from which the government has barred them"; of talking to Indians and hearing their "evasive answers"; and hearing dark threats and whispers about the Ku Klux Klan.

"A sinister tinge seemed to creep into the warm spring sunshine. The azure skies seemed to darken," he wrote. The foreboding was precipitated by unlikely perpetrators little knots of children on their way home from school. Some were Caucasian, "rightful heirs to the broad acres of the fertile valley," and some were Japanese, all playing and romping together. This was all "a really pretty picture," until Bermann was overcome with a feeling of revulsion by the sight he beheld. He described a sturdy American boy of 10 or 11 and a little Japanese girl, "like an Oriental doll." Even as Bermann watched, the little boy laid his arm around the girl's waist and, with childish innocence, kissed her on the lips. "There before my eyes was the real Japanese problem. And not merely of Wapato. But of Washington of America of the whole Caucasian race."

Seattle Star editorial writers now had the documentation they needed to call again for state and federal action, "AT ONCE!" Without such steps trouble would result, as evidenced by rumors of a KKK campaign. Clearly the anti-alien land law had not solved the problem, the editorial said. "More Japs are getting control of more land every year. More Jap shacks are springing up. The Jap menace is GROWING!"
The year 1923 thus may have been the most traumatic for Yakima Valley Issei and Nisei between the benchmarks of the 1921 state anti-alien land law and Pearl Harbor. Only the Depression-induced dynamiting of seven Japanese farms near Wapato in 1933 equaled the tension of the year in which the Ku Klux Klan paraded and the Seattle Star thundered as local newspaper owners watched in editorial silence. But the American Legion and its allies notwithstanding, 1,000 Japanese Americans lived through the two difficult decades, finally defeated only by President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1942 evacuation order.

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