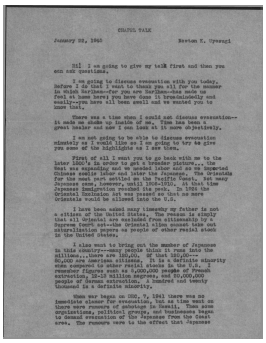
Newton K. (Uyesugi) Wesley (1917-)



CHURCH TALK

January 22, 1945 Newton K. Uyesugi

Bill I am going to give my talk first and then you can ask questions.

I am going to discuss evacuation with you today. Before I do that I want to thank you all for the member in Christ Services--for you are Christians--has made us feel at home here; you have done it wholeheartedly and we have all been small and we wanted you to meet God.

There was a time when I could not discuss evacuation--it made me shake up inside of me. Time has been a great healer and now I can look at it more objectively.

I am not going to be able to discuss evacuation minutely as I could like as I am going to try to give you some of the highlights as I see them.

First of all I want you to go back with me to the later 1800's in order to get a broader picture... the West was expanding and we needed labor and so we imported the Chinese and the Japanese to do the work. The Chinese came for the most part settled on the Pacific Coast. The early Japanese came, however, until 1908-1910. At that time Japanese Immigration revoked its pact. In 1924 the Oriental Exclusion Act was passed so that no more Orientals could be allowed into the U.S.

I have been asked many times why my father is not a citizen. The reason is because the Supreme Court ruled that all Oriental are excluded from citizenship for a Supreme Court ruling--the Oriental alien cannot take out citizenship papers as people of other racial stock in the United States.

I also want to bring out the number of Japanese in the country--the 1940 census. Within it came into the million country--the 1940 census. Within it came into the million country--the 1940 census. Within it came into the 80,000 are American citizens. It is a definite minority when compared to other racial stocks in the U.S. I mean compared to other racial stocks in the U.S. 2 million negroes, and 2 million Mexicans, 3-4 million Indians, 35-3 million negroes, and 80,000,000 people of German extraction. A hundred and twenty thousand is a definite minority.

When war began on Dec. 7, 1941 there was no immediate cause for evacuation, but as time went on there were rumors of sabotage in Hawaii. These were spread by people who had ulterior motives in mind and to demand evacuation of the Japanese from the Coast area. The rumors were to the effect that Japanese

Dr. Newton K. (Uyesugi) Wesley, an optometrist and medical doctor in Oregon, was a pioneer in the development of plastic corneal contact lenses in the 1940s and 1950s. He and his partner, Dr. George Jessen, invented the first plastic contact lenses to successfully treat keratoconus, a mysterious condition that, if left untreated, results in blindness. Wesley himself suffered from keratoconus, and his lenses arrested the progress of the disease and saved his sight. He not only developed many types of lenses, but he also taught thousands of doctors how to fit the relatively new ocular aids to help their patients. After approval by the American Medical Association in 1970, variations of the lenses have been worn by millions of people all over the world.

Newton Uyesugi was born on October 1, 1917, to immigrant Japanese parents in the sawmill town of Westport, Oregon. In 1925, his family moved to Portland, and at the age of nineteen he enrolled at the North Pacific College of Optometry. He changed his name legally to Newton K. Wesley in 1942, he later explained, because when he was practicing optometry in Portland his patients did not know that Uyesugi started with a "U" and could not find his name in the telephone book.

Soon after Wesley opened his practice in Portland in 1939, his former teacher and owner of North Pacific College, Dr. Harry Lee Fording, offered to sell the business to him for $5,000. Wesley was only twenty-two years old at the time, but he and another classmate, Dr. Roy Clunas, bought the school in 1940. The partners operated the school until the summer of 1942, when they were forced to close. Wesley was confined at the Portland Assembly Center for people of Japanese ancestry and, after a few months, was “relocated” to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. He never returned to Oregon to practice.

Wesley made his first major professional contribution when the North Pacific College of Optometry merged with Pacific University in 1945 to become the Pacific University College of Optometry. Partly as a result of his efforts, the title Doctor of Optometry (O.D.) is considered an accredited, post-doctoral academic degree equivalent to degrees such as M.D. or D.M.D. Wesley was a member of the board of trustees at Pacific University for decades and is now an honorary member of that board.

In 1946, Wesley entered the field of contact lenses when he joined with George Jessen in Chicago to form the Wesley Jessen Corporation, a contact lens company. Schering Plough bought the company in 1980, and Ciba Visions bought it in 2001. Though few people know that the contact lenses worn by millions of people today grew out of the pioneering efforts of Newton K. Wesley and George N. Jessen, their names are still honored in the industry.

Written by Homer Yasui

Further Reading:

Hosokawa, Bill. *Nisei: The Quiet Americans*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002.

Wesley, Newton K. *Contacts—One Hundred Years Plus* New York: Vantage Press, 1988.

Copyright © 2008-2013 Portland State University