Three Stories in Crystal City

by Rob Buscher

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On Saturday, November 10 members of the Crystal City Pilgrimage Committee (CCPC) joined together with local residents of Crystal City to open the first permanent exhibit on the wartime incarceration in the state of Texas. This exhibit, titled America’s Last WWII Concentration Camp, is based on the research of Hector Estrada, a retired plumber and Crystal City native who has devoted his retirement years to telling the story of this camp. Estrada’s exhibit was previously shown during the 2019 and 2023 Crystal City pilgrimage, and has now found a permanent home inside of a local history museum called My Story Museum - The Story of Us: Tres Historias en Crystal City. My Story Museum, which opened on November 10, also tells the stories of local veterans and the history of Zavala County.

Located in South Texas two hours Southwest of San Antonio and known as the “Spinach Capitol of the World,” Crystal City is home to the nation’s largest spinach-growing operation. The opening event fell during Crystal City’s Annual Spinach Festival, which attracted an approximate 30,000 attendees between November 7-10, more than quadrupling the town’s approximate 6,500 residents. Crystal City also played a significant role during the Chicano Movement of the as the site of numerous student protests in 1969 that led to school reform and election victories by working-class Mexican American farm laborers who became leaders of the progressive political group La Raza Unida Party.

My Story Museum is the brainchild of former city manager Diana Palacios – herself one of the 1969 student protest leaders who helped organize a series of school walkouts in response to the unequal treatment that Mexican Americans were receiving at that time. Any student caught speaking Spanish in school faced corporal punishment. Palacios shared that her older sister was once beaten for “laughing in Spanish.” Despite being a community of nearly 85% Mexican Americans, only one spot on the cheerleading squad was allocated to a non-white student. The Mexican students were even prohibited from eating lunch inside of the cafeteria with white students, instead being relegated to picnic benches outside in the hot Texas sun.

After Palacios was denied a spot on the cheer squad despite being the most qualified candidate in her Freshmen class, this was the last straw for students who would no longer stand for being treated as second class citizens. After months of planning, the students launched their walkout in December 1969, garnering enough press that Senator Ted Kennedy met with some of the student leaders. By January 1970 after the holiday recess, the school board agreed to the students’ demands, opening the way for progressive Chicano organizers to sweep the local elections in the following cycle.

Decades later, Palacios is now a successful business owner in her hometown and seeking a way to bring local history to life for both local residents and out-of-town visitors, decided to open the museum. The historic former Rexall Drugs building that My Story Museum is located in holds another piece of personal history for Palacios. Her father, Manuel Palacios, was a decorated WWII veteran who returned from the war determined to fight for the equal rights of Mexican Americans. When Palacios registered as the first Mexican American to run for Zavala County Sheriff, a Texas Ranger beat him over the head with a pistol, leaving him bloodied and threatening further violence if he did not remove his name from the ballot. Although he did not win the race, he refused to withdraw as a symbol of resistance against the white supremacist power structure of the era. That beating took place in front of the same building where My Story Museum is now located.

With this context I journeyed to rural South Texas to help with the museum opening. Boarding an airplane from progressive Philadelphia to conservative Texas less than 48 hours after the highly polarizing election seemed at best ill-advised, at worst perhaps bad for my health. I was not sure what to expect when I arrived, but was relieved to learn that Crystal City’s electorate voted majority Democrat in the recent election. This knowledge dispelled some of the preconceived notions that I had about state politics in rural Texas and gave me a sense of comfort knowing I would be entering a community with similar feelings about the election results.

Adding to the significance of this trip, my brother-in-law Kurt Ikeda joined me, whose grandfather was incarcerated at Crystal City during the war. Experiencing the former confinement site and museum through his eyes made the history more personal than past visits to some of the WRA sites where I had less direct connections to former incarcerees.

On the morning of our first day in Crystal City, we had the opportunity to tour the grounds of the former German School, thanks to CCPC board member and local high school social studies teacher and coach Ruben Salazar. Mr. Salazar became involved with the pilgrimage committee when the Crystal City School District hosted a welcome luncheon for pilgrims at their 2019 event. Since 2012, Salazar had been the caretaker of Hector Estrada’s exhibit collection and was the person who organized the temporary exhibits at both the 2019 and 2023 pilgrimages.

Mr. Salazar took us on an impromptu tour of the old school grounds located in the campus of the current elementary school, no easy feat after the major security improvements that Crystal City School District implemented after the horrific school shooting that took place in nearby Uvalde, just 38 miles to the North. Thankfully with Mr. Salazar to vouch for us, Kurt and I were able to get visitor passes to tour the site along with Crystal City incarceration survivors Hiroshi Shimizu and Kaz Naganumu who were being filmed for a local news special by KENS 5, a CBS affiliate based in San Antonio.

Between 1942 and 1948, this lesser-known Crystal City detention site held approximately 4,751 persons of Japanese, German, and Italian nationality, along with their US-born family members. The camp also imprisoned thousands of Latin American families of Japanese ancestry who were kidnapped from at least 13 countries in Central and South America as part of a prisoner of war exchange program. With POW transfers made on a basis of 1-for-1 exchange, and considering how few Japanese soldiers were taken alive in the Pacific Front, the US government decided to game the numbers by trading Latinx Nikkei for US soldiers held captive by Imperial Japan. The federal government paid foreign governments to hand over their Japanese ancestry populations who were then taken to the port of New Orleans. Upon arrival their passports and other travel documents were destroyed, thereby making them stateless persons. By the racist logic of that era they were then considered Japanese nationals, eligible for POW exchange, and brought to Crystal City from there to await repatriation.

CCPC Board President Kaz Naganumu was born Kazumu Julio Cesar Naganumu in Cañao, Peru. In 1944 the FBI came to Peru and kidnapped his family along with many other Japanese Peruvian families. Naganumu’s father was given three days to pack up the family and to board a ship to New Orleans, a destination that was unknown to them until they arrived. Naganumu recalls, “Once we reached New Orleans, my mother saw some Japanese faces there, so she thought maybe we arrived in Japan.” Upon arrival the Japanese Peruvians were stripped naked and sprayed with DDT to supposedly fumigate them before being placed on a train to Texas.

The Naganuma family spent three and a half years in Crystal City from March 1944 to September 1947. At the end of the war Peru refused to take them back, and not wanting to repatriate to Japan – a country where Kaz and his siblings had never set foot in, the Naganumas were released under the sponsorship of Reverend Fukuda of the Konko-kyo Church in San Francisco. Speaking only Japanese and Spanish, the family was able to eke out a living working in Japantown. Now in his 80s, Naganuma reminisces, “I'm actually surprised that my parents made it through, not just to live day-to-day, but the psychological impact they had. To lose your entire livelihood to get to where you are now. They had everything taken away, I'm not sure how they got through.” Of the approximately 2,600 Latinx Nikkei at Crystal City, several hundred were repatriated to Japan, about 600 were eventually returned to Peru, and another several hundred settled at Seabrook Farms in New Jersey.

The fact that Crystal City was the only large-scale detention site that held multi-national and multi-ethnic population during WWII makes it unique. Another standout feature of the camp is that it was the final point of departure for renunciants who were repatriated to Japan, which is part of the reason for its longevity after the war. This was what initially led CCPC Vice President Hiroshi Shimizu and his family to Crystal City. Early in the war, Shimizu’s father agreed to be repatriated to Japan along with his father who was arrested by the FBI in the initial roundup of community leaders. Hiroshi’s birth delayed his parents’ ability to return to Japan and they eventually wound up in Tule Lake where his father was imprisoned in the stockade for participating in the camp protests. Renouncing his citizenship under duress, the elder Shimizu attempted to rescind his decision and in March 1946 the family was transferred to Crystal City to await the State Department’s ruling on whether they could remain in the US.

Daily life in the Crystal City camp was markedly different compared to the larger WRA sites because as a formally designated POW camp, the federal government adhered to certain standards of living that far exceeded what was made available to Japanese Americans elsewhere in detention. Rather than the typical 100-foot tar paper barracks divided into 20x20-foot apartments, each incarceree family was given half of a brick duplex to live in. These buildings were equipped with bathrooms and kitchens that even included their own ice boxes, allowing incarcerees a far greater degree of autonomy and privacy.

Hiroshi Shimizu remembers, “the food was so much better because we lived in a duplex where my mother cooked her own meals for the family, so we weren't eating in the mess hall. They would issue these paper tokens to the inmates to spend at the general store, and with that they would buy their groceries. For the very first time in my life, we had a real icebox at the duplex in Crystal City and they delivered ice every other day. Amazingly, I remember they used to deliver milk to us. And when I hear that they didn't do that for the Mexican Americans here, you felt privileged. Well, they didn't have the Geneva Accords to protect them.”

Another significant variation from the typical WRA camp was the swimming pool at Crystal City. The 250-foot-wide pool was designed by Italian-Honduran civil engineer Elmo Gaetano Zannoni, with German Americans who specialized in concrete providing the labor. While the amenity was enjoyed by many as a reprieve from the dry South Texas heat, it was also the source of the camp’s worst tragedy when two Peruvian Japanese girls, Sachiko Tanabe (13) and Aiko Oyakawa (11) drowned there in 1944.

In 2023 town officials helped the Crystal City Pilgrimage Committee to create a memorial monument placed at the former site of the camp swimming pool, built a shelter to protect the monument from the sun, and renamed the adjacent street “Calle Aiko y Sachiko” in their memory. This was the next stop that we visited after leaving the German School building.

After spending some time reflecting on the significance of the site, Kurt and I drove the short distance to the area where we believed his grandfather’s duplex was located. Overgrown with yellowed and sunburnt sedge grass and interspersed with clumps of prickly pear cactus, the area had been used as dumping grounds for fill taken from the nearby airfield. Among the debris we found chunks of concrete, likely foundation of the former duplex buildings based on the condition of wear. A sudden and unseasonable rain storm cut our visit short as we went back to the museum to meet the rest of the CCPC members working on finishing touches for the following day’s museum opening.

That evening we reconvened at one of the local restaurants, Miguelito’s, where we enjoyed stimulating conversation and delicious Tex-Mex fare. Towards the end of our meal a local man named Sergio introduced himself to our group. Sergio and his family lived in one of the former duplex buildings that had been sold to the Crystal City Housing Authority after the camp’s closure. He shared with us that they had previously lived in a disused train car, which became uninhabitable after a storm caused the roof to collapse. Thankfully his family received a housing grant and were enabled to reside in the duplex, where he spent most of his childhood and adolescence. The complex nature of the region’s history and overlapping experiences of marginalization felt more tangible having put a face to the postwar afterlives of the remnants of Crystal City camp.

The next morning Kurt and I returned under clear skies to the swimming pool site, exploring what remained of the concrete foundation and water tank that had been turned into a makeshift memorial by Japanese Peruvians who visited the site during a 2002 pilgrimage. A striking feature of the former swimming pool is the Texas ash tree that grows out of the concrete foundation. Our local guides noted that this tree survives beyond all odds in an area that is typically inhospitable to its growth, rather symbolic to the communities who were once held as prisoners in this space and now thrive in the postwar era.

From the swimming pool we walked directly east into an area known as the old airport, that houses two disused airstrips that were formerly used for crop dusting planes. Combining the old map of the Crystal City camp with satellite images of the area, Kurt and I explored the grounds that once housed the recreation activities including a baseball field, football field, and soccer field. A little further south we came across an old concrete foundation that was most likely the former elementary school that Japanese Americans and Latinx Nikkei attended. Among the debris field were old playground equipment from various eras, including some that appeared to be from the wartime. Kurt and I are both fathers of young children under the age of 5. The sobering sight of sun-worn merry-go-rounds and paint-peeled jungle gyms allowed us to feel at least in that moment, a small fraction of what parents might have felt while watching their children play inside of a concentration camp.

We returned to the main business corridor of Crystal City where the townspeople had placed rows of lawn chairs the night before to claim their spots along the parade route. Our mood lightened considerably as we were welcomed by the local business owner of PFS, an accounts receivable call center that services medical providers around the country, who invited us to join their company-sponsored barbecue. We enjoyed pleasant conversation with local residents as we feasted on brisket and watched the Spinach Festival parade. The juxtaposition between our earlier morning exploration of the former concentration camp, and the slice of life window into small town Texas was stark, but knowing that the local community supported our efforts to memorialize the wartime history gave us a sense of belonging.

Following the parade, we prepared for the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the My Story Museum. Ribbon cutters included CCPC’s two incarceration survivors – Kaz Naganuma and Hiroshi Shimizu, My Story Museum founder Diana Palacios, Ruben Salazar, Hector Estrada, and Miss Spinach Festival 2024. The ceremony was opened by Commander Juan Garcia of the American Legion Post 396, who presented the colors. Reverend Edgardo Castillo gave a convocation and opening prayer. Mayor Frank Moreno Jr. acknowledged Kaz and Hiroshi as returning citizens of Crystal City, warmly welcoming them back as if they were native sons of this land.

It was in these small moments of connection throughout our time in Crystal City that made this experience stand out as exceptional to the many pilgrimages I have attended elsewhere in the country. While the circumstances were wholly different between our communities, both Mexican Americans and Nikkei incarceration survivors have suffered immensely under the institutional racism of the United States.

For several hours following the ribbon cutting, I stood in the museum exhibit distributing keepsake pinback buttons and answering questions that individuals had about the wartime incarceration. In each of these interactions I sensed a profound feeling of gratitude from local residents who were proud to have a physical location to celebrate their town’s history, and the role that the CCPC played in bringing this to fruition. With so many of these individuals we shared a mutual recognition of the shared experiences that our community elders had endured, and respect for the resilience and community labor it took to improve these circumstances for younger generations like my own.

Comparing notes over dinner, we learned that many of the local residents shared their memories of growing up in the duplex buildings like Sergio, the man we met the previous day, or attending school inside of the old German School building. In many cases they were unaware of the larger historical events that brought these buildings to Crystal City. For most this was the first time they learned about the scope of the wartime incarceration and its impact on the Nikkei diaspora. In each interaction we were humbled by the genuine sense of solidarity as we saw bits of ourselves reflected in the experiences of others.

Our final morning in Crystal City was spent preparing for a panel discussion featuring Kaz Naganuma, Hiroshi Shimizu, Ruben Salazar, and Hector Estrada. It was then that Kurt and I also had a chance to get to know Estrada a little better. When Kurt introduced himself to Estrada and shared that we were able to locate his grandfather’s duplex thanks to the research presented in the exhibit, Estrada burst into tears of joy. We shared an emotional moment of gratitude and deep respect for a man who had no family connection to the wartime incarceration, and yet had given so much to ensure this history will not be forgotten.

Asked about his motivation for doing this work, Estrada answered, “I was born in 1946 in an area of Crystal City called El Chico. That area was loaded with old shacks that were used by migrant workers, we used to call it El Campo. They told us that was because it was a labor camp where all these migrant laborers were grouped together. As far as we knew, that's all it had been, a labor camp. But then after I graduated, got married and left the state, I moved to San Jose California and we were doing a job close to Japantown. We used to go eat at some of the restaurants and I saw that there was a Japanese American museum there. I went to visit it just before I retired and found out that Crystal City had actually been a detention camp for Japanese people. We were never told in school about it. We didn't know anything about it. So when I found out, I decided to start researching. I was shocked and angry that I was never taught this history. I vowed to bring this history back to Crystal City. People need to know the terrible injustice that happened.”

For over ten years after his retirement in 2001, Estrada researched the National Archives, the Texas State historical archives, and numerous educational institutions, compiling photos, videos and documents about the internment camp. Using his own resources and computer skills, he created a 1,000-photo exhibit and a series of online videos telling the story of Crystal City’s camp. Despite losing his son just weeks prior to the 2024 Spinach Festival and being diagnosed with terminal lung disease, Estrada journeyed to Crystal City for likely the last time to participate in the ribbon cutting and museum opening panel.

Our panel discussion lasted just over 90 minutes, including nearly 40 minutes of Q&A discussion with the audience. When asked what it meant knowing that his work would live on in the My Story Museum, Estrada said, “I am so thankful. I'm so happy that all these pictures are still being used to show what the United States has done to all these poor people.”

Needing to catch our flights back from San Antonio in just a few short hours after the panel ended, Kurt and I said fond farewells to the new friends we made deep and lasting connections with during our limited time in Crystal City. As we reflected on our experiences in South Texas on the drive to the airport, it gave us both hope for the future of our country, having witnessed two communities come together as one.

Work on the museum will continue over the next year to further expand the historical interpretation as the CCPC prepares for phase II of the camp exhibit, which is tentatively planned to be unveiled during the pilgrimage scheduled to take place October 9-12, 2025.

The Crystal City Pilgrimage Committee is excited to share the wonderful experiences we have enjoyed in Texas with the 2025 pilgrimage attendees, exploring the two stories of the WWII incarceration and Chicano Movement protests in Crystal City. There we will write a third story together, as our communities continue building friendship and solidarity through recognition of our shared histories and collective struggles.

*For more information on the Crystal City Pilgrimage Committee and My Story Museum, please visit:* [*https://www.crystalcitypilgrimage.org/*](https://www.crystalcitypilgrimage.org/)