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## Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin: An Extraordinary Life

By: **Phoebe Ann Pollitt** and David Yamaguchi

### **Abstract**

A brief bio of Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi, who was one of about 85 Japanese American registered nurses to be forced into Relocation Centers across the country (U.S.A.).

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# Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin: An Extraordinary Life

BY PHOEBE ANN POLLITT AND DAVID YAMAGUCHI





**T**he shades to all of the train cars were pulled down, to block the passengers' views of what was happening outside, and where the train would be going. Outside, along all paths leading to the train, parked along Alaskan Way on the Seattle waterfront, there were sentries armed with rifles everywhere, watching the movements of the passengers heading toward the cars in a long line. Yet the passengers did not appear dangerous. For they included old men, young mothers with babes in arms; young boys, with all capable of carrying suitcases. The general public was kept back. They gawked from the passenger overpass. Black porters waited beside the cars in white jackets.

But probably most curious of all was a small group of three women, two middle-aged Caucasian ones, who said their goodbyes and good wishes to the young Asian one, before she too stepped away from her party to join the line of passengers en route for the train. Unlike the others, beneath her jacket which protected her from the March cold, she wore a uniform. It was a white nurse's uniform, complete with a cap. She was a college-educated registered nurse, who had volunteered for the assignment. The ink on her diploma, framed and in her handbag, was barely dry. It had just been handed to her, three months early, by two of her nursing instructors. She boarded the train, walked down the aisle, saying hello and *Ohayo gozaimasu* [good morning] to those she passed. As those new to their jobs do, whatever her inward doubts, the young nurse tried to

convey to her charges a sense of confidence, that she knew her job and was up to the task. The date was March 30, 1942. There were 227 Asian American passengers on board, plus the Caucasian army sentries, and train crew. The young nurse's first responsibility would be to see that all arrived safely at their unknown destination.

Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi was born June 29, 1920 to Tadashi Yamaguchi (Father) and Misao Ikebata (Mother) in Bellevue, Washington. She was the middle of six children; two older sisters stayed in Japan when the family immigrated to the United States, and the oldest of four siblings who were born and raised in Washington state. They all attended the local public schools. Natsuko graduated from Garfield High School in 1937 where she was an honor roll student and worked on the school newspaper.

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Before World War II, few Asian American women earned nursing credentials, and even fewer graduated from college programs with the four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. There were two reasons for this. The first was demography. As comparatively recent immigrant groups, by 1940 the U.S.-born children of Chinese

and Japanese families were just reaching college age. The second was racist policies limiting Asian American enrollment in schools and colleges. However, Natsuko was determined to become a professional nurse so she gained admittance to Seattle College in the fall of 1938—through the intercession of the Yamaguchi family doctor, who had connections there—and began her nursing studies. It seems likely that it was on the largely Caucasian Catholic campus that Natsuko was given her western name, "Catherine"—probably by the nuns who taught the nursing students. None of Natsuko's siblings had western names.

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On December 7, 1941, after the Japanese military attacked U.S. naval bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the United States entered World War II and declared war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Two months later, on February 19, 1942, during the spring semester of Chin's senior year, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, mandating the removal of "resident enemy aliens." Within a few months, approximately 110,000 Japanese citizens and residents were forcibly evacuated from their homes on the

west coast and "relocated" into ten concentration camps from Idaho to Arkansas. Chin's family was, of course, removed from Bellevue along with the thousands of others.

Chin's nephew, David Yamaguchi, reports that "In her final year [of nursing school] in 1941–1942, Natsuko's days involved hands-on training and rooming at Providence Hospital." Japanese American people living on Bainbridge Island in Washington state were the first to be evacuated. They were sent to the Manzanar Relocation Center in central California. The Yamaguchi family, including Natsuko, had relatives and friends on Bainbridge Island. When the Bainbridge Island evacuees were forced off the island in late March 1942, "Natsuko boarded the train, and accompanied the Bainbridge people to Manzanar as a nurse ... those sweet SU [Seattle University] nuns must have given Natsuko her June diploma early. I would imagine them handing it to her saying 'Here, you're going to need this,'" says David.

Chin's graduation date from Seattle College was March 1942. She was one of about 85 Japanese American registered nurses to be forced into Relocation Centers across the country. However, Natsuko's entering Manzanar stands apart from those of all the other Nisei (U.S.-born second-generation Japanese Americans) nurses, for she alone entered the camps voluntarily, to accompany the Bainbridge Islanders, two months before her own family would be required to show up at the gates of Camp Harmony/Puyallup Assembly Center in Seattle.



David continues the story: "The young Natsuko was exactly what the Bainbridge people needed. There were elderly and babies aboard that crowded train of 227 islanders. As a JA [Japanese American] friend of the Nishinakas [a Bainbridge Island family], she was an immediate insider. Like many Nisei eldest daughters, she spoke fluent Japanese. Moreover, Natsuko had rare skills: as most Seattle Nisei were still in high school in 1942, there were simply few other university-trained Nisei nurses available in greater Seattle to accompany the Bainbridge people."

**Many older immigrants confined to Manzanar spoke only Japanese while others, typically younger siblings of the U.S.-born generation, were fluent only in English. Registered nurse Yamaguchi was an ideal teacher for the Red Cross because she was qualified to teach both classes in both languages.**

Approximately 10,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated in the Manzanar Relocation Center. According to the [National Park Service](#),

Manzanar's internees were unaccustomed to the harsh desert environment. Summer temperatures soared as high as 110°F. In winter, temperatures frequently plunged below freezing. Throughout the

year strong winds swept through the valley, often blanketing the camp with dust and sand ... An oil stove, a single hanging light bulb, cots, blankets, and mattresses filled with straw were the only furnishings provided. The 500-acre housing section was surrounded by barbed wire and eight guard towers with searchlights and was patrolled by military police.

In its booklet *Minidoka*, The National Park Service [reports](#),

The quality of the food served was poor, with milk and fresh meat constantly in short supply. Inexpensive foods such as wieners, dried fish, pancakes, macaroni and pickled vegetables were served often. Vegetables, which had been an important part of the Japanese Americans' diet on the West Coast, were replaced in camp with starches.

The meals were planned at an average cost of not more than 45 cents per person per day, or 15 cents per meal. Contaminated food, water, and milk caused frequent outbreaks of dysentery in all the camps. While there were hospitals in each concentration camp, all were understaffed and under supplied to handle the health care needs of the internees. Patients with acute illness, needing surgical interventions or in labor were hospitalized while care for those with chronic diseases, including tuberculosis were not isolated in sanitariums as was standard treatment at the time, but became the

responsibility of family members. The stress of incarceration, overcrowded conditions, exposure to extremes in temperature, and poor diets contributed to declining health in many of the internees.

**In 1953, she co-authored an article in *Nursing Outlook* titled "The Unhospitalized Tuberculosis Patient."**

In light of the many health concerns and limited care provided in the camp, in the fall of 1942, internees and Center officials approached the San Francisco Chapter of the American Red Cross requesting first-aid and home nursing classes. The Chapter agreed to sponsor teachers and issue certificates to students who passed the end of course tests. Women who received certificates in the home nursing class were eligible for jobs as nursing assistants in camp hospitals. More than 200 Manzanar residents completed the home nursing course and another 100 completed the first aid course. Many older immigrants confined to Manzanar spoke only Japanese while others, typically younger siblings of the U.S.-born generation, were fluent only in English. Registered nurse Yamaguchi was an ideal teacher for the Red Cross because she was qualified to teach both classes in both languages. In addition to her hospital work, Natsuko began teaching classes for the Red Cross in 1942. In 1943, the famous photographer Ansel Adams was documenting life in Manzanar. He photographed

her wearing her Red Cross cap and Red Cross pin and labeled her photograph, "Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi, Red Cross Instructor."

Except for the Bainbridge Islanders, most internees in Manzanar were from more urban areas in California. This created some cultural conflict between the Californians and the more rural farmers from Washington. In 1943, the Bainbridge Islanders at Manzanar petitioned the U.S. Government to be transferred to Camp Minidoka, in Hunt, Idaho, where most Japanese Americans from the Seattle area, including extended family members and friends of the Bainbridge Islanders were by then incarcerated. Conditions at Minidoka were very similar to those at Manzanar. In February 1943, Chin moved with the Bainbridge Islanders to Camp Minidoka and was reunited with her family. She began work in the Camp Hospital; however, her experience and success in teaching Red Cross courses at Manzanar soon changed her circumstances.

A clipping from *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, Idaho), May 1, 1943 explains:

Miss Natsuko Yamaguchi of the hospital nursing staff has recently been appointed by the American Red Cross as itinerant home nursing instructress. She will conduct classes here during May and June. Thereafter she will travel to other centers in a similar capacity.

Chin taught classes for the Red Cross at relocation



centers across the country until September 1944 when she entered Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City to earn an advanced certificate in public health nursing. After passing an FBI background check, Japanese American women in the Relocation Centers were eligible to leave the centers to pursue college level studies, including nursing. In 1943, only 20 nursing schools were known to accept these women; Teachers College was one of them. After a year of course work and clinical experiences, Chin earned her Public Health Nursing certificate, then considered an advanced degree.

After her graduation from Teachers College in June 1945, the war was winding down and Natsuko was allowed to resume civilian life. She returned to Seattle and a job in the King County Health Department focusing on eradicating tuberculosis, especially among the several hundred Japanese Americans returning from the relocation centers. In 1949, she married Que Chin, a Seattle photographer, and in 1951 gave birth to their daughter Mari. By the mid-1950s, Chin left the King County Health Department and spent the remainder of her career working at Group Health Hospital on Capitol Hill in Seattle. In 1953, she co-authored an article in *Nursing Outlook* titled "The Unhospitalized Tuberculosis Patient." Chin presented her portion of the article at the 1953 Annual

Meeting of the National Tuberculosis Association; her speech was published in the *Transactions of the Annual Meeting, National Tuberculosis Association*. In addition to full-time work and family responsibilities, Chin was active in the Washington State Nurses Association and in 1963 was elected a Director of the organization. On April 6, 1980, in testimony before a Congressional Committee, Chin advocated for the continued funding of the U.S. Public Health Hospital in Seattle, which was in peril of being defunded. She recalled the help medical staff from the hospital gave to the thousands of Japanese Americans forced to live in renovated stables and other outbuildings at the Puyallup Fair Grounds Assembly Center in 1942.

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**On April 6, 1980, in testimony before a Congressional Committee, Chin advocated for the continued funding of the U.S. Public Health Hospital in Seattle, which was in peril of being defunded.**

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Chin retired from paid work in the 1980s and began volunteering with a variety of community nonprofit agencies. She was particularly involved with the International District Health Clinic, where she was Chairperson of the Board of

Directors. She also traveled extensively, making multiple extended trips to the ancestral family home in Fukui prefecture, Japan. Chin died on March 6, 1998.

Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin was a remarkable woman and nurse. Without immediate role models, she graduated from Seattle College and became a registered nurse. She voluntarily joined the first group of Japanese Americans forcibly displaced from their homes and taken to the Manzanar concentration camp. She not only worked long shifts at the camp hospital for very low pay, but also she added the responsibility of teaching Red Cross Home Nursing and First Aid courses to her fellow internees to improve their quality of life. Her clinical, linguistic, and leadership skills were quickly apparent, and she was promoted to become an Itinerant Red Cross Instructor for all ten Internment Camps in the United States. During the War, she earned an advanced certificate in Public Health Nursing from the prestigious Teachers College in New York City. Following her incarceration, Chin worked full time, married, and raised a daughter and was active in community and professional organizations. She even found time to write an article for a professional journal and testify before a Congressional Committee. Nurse Chin's life and work deserve to be honored and remembered. **MN**



Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin

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**Phoebe Ann Pollitt practiced and taught community health nursing for over 30 years before she retired in 2019. She writes nursing history, usually focusing on southern and Appalachian nurses of all races.**

**David Yamaguchi is a retired University of Washington professor of dendrology who currently edits the Seattle community newspaper, *The North American Post*. He is the author and co-author of numerous scientific articles about dendrology—the study of trees, and he coauthored the book, *The Orphan Tsunami of 1700*. He is also a nephew of Catherine Natsuko Yamaguchi Chin.**