



George Takei, center, talks about his experiences at the Rohwer internment camp with, from left, his husband, Brad Takei, and Colin Thompson, art administrator for the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, while a documentary-film crew looks on and listens in.

The Boy Behind the Barbed Wire

ACTOR-CUM-ACTIVIST GEORGE TAKEI REVISITS HIS CHILDHOOD DAYS IN ARKANSAS

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

One day in 1942, five-year-old George Takei raced home from school with news for his parents. “We learned the Pledge of Allegiance today!” he told them excitedly. Then, placing his hand over his heart, he began to recite it: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America...”

As their son demonstrated his newly won knowledge, Norman and Emily Takei could look out the window of the barracks they lived in and see the barbed-wire fencing that kept them there, thousands of miles from their home in California, in a U.S. government internment camp outside a little southeast Arkansas town called Rohwer.

The Takeis, like thousands of other American

citizens of Japanese descent living on the West Coast, had been deemed a potential threat to wartime security and were rounded up in 1942 and relocated to internment camps in the country’s interior. This remains one of the most egregious violations of citizens’ rights in American history.

But for young George Takei, the Rohwer experience was a largely positive one. How could it not be? A train ride across the country to a verdant land where he caught pollywogs in the marshes and huddled with his family during thunderstorms ... and learned to pledge allegiance to the flag of a country that had put his family behind barbed wire.

Today, however, George Takei is not a bitter man. He holds no grudge against his country

or the state where his family was imprisoned. Throughout his lifetime, he’s done much to address the injustices of the past and fight the injustices of the future. As Hikaru Sulu on the original *Star Trek* TV series, he was part of a multiracial cast in an iconic show that took on socially charged issues. As a gay man, he’s been outspoken on matters of equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. And he has worked to improve relations between Japan and the United States.

So when the invitation comes to return to this state in February for a special performance with the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, Takei says yes. It will give him a chance to visit again the ruins of the Rohwer camp, where little is left but the cemetery. And while there, he posts a photo

of himself to his Facebook page, standing before the memorial to the internees and holding a sign that says, “This Place Matters.”

Because it does matter to George Takei, and he thinks it should matter to you.

TUCKED AWAY IN THE REFURBISHED buildings that make up the Arkansas Studies Institute is a collection of artwork, crafts, and official materials from the Rohwer camp. And the morning before his symphony performance, Takei accepts an invitation from *Arkansas Life* to have a look at some of the artifacts from his temporary childhood home.

At the ASI, Takei exhibits an intense interest in everything. He’s attentive to everyone who speaks with him, and his voice is warm and full. He’s fascinated by the historical and architectural details of the room: the antiquated coffee-bagging equipment hanging from the ceiling, the detail from the city’s original Carnegie library, the background of the Jewish social club that used to call the building home—it all interests him.

“See, Brad?” he says to his husband, Brad Takei, pointing to a landscape painting. “I told you how lush Rohwer was, with all those trees.”

Pausing next by a display case full of small carvings and other handicrafts, Takei points to the tiny, colorful, wooden bird pins.

“These were very popular,” he explains. “Birds represented freedom because they could fly beyond the barbed-wire fence.”

Yet despite the barbed wire, Takei explains, there were some locals who actually envied the Japanese-Americans. That’s because the internees could be sure they’d get three meals a day, and their electricity was paid for by the government.

Following Takei around the table and explaining the provenance of various pieces in the collection is the ASI’s Nathania Sawyer. Both the collection and Takei’s visit have special meaning to her: She is half-Japanese, born in the island nation after the end of World War II and adopted by an American couple who brought her back to the States.

“It really makes me think how, if I’d been born just a few years earlier,” she says, pointing to a photo of young children in the Rohwer camp, “that would’ve been me.”

It takes just a few minutes for a rapport to develop between Sawyer and Takei, who is chairman emeritus of the board of trustees for the Japanese American National Museum. Standing beside them, Brad Takei takes a moment to express his own sense of wonder.

“I feel like when George talks about it, he’s a living eyewitness to history,” he says. “I feel blessed to be one degree of separation away from George and hear these stories.”

Sawyer shows Takei a photo of students standing next to bed sheets painted with scenes of life in the camp—a study for eight murals painted for the camp’s auditorium. After he wonders aloud what those students might be doing today, she points out that while ASI has these photos, the Japanese American National Museum has the actual painted sheets. In the next moment, they’re



Artworks from the Rowher collection.

talking about the possibility of an exchange of artifacts between the two institutions.

“I’m so glad this collection stayed in Arkansas, because it’d be so easy to say, ‘That’s *their* history,’” Sawyer tells Takei. “But in a way, you can see it’s our history, too.”

“Absolutely,” he agrees.

“IT’S PERSONAL TO ME,” Takei says of the memories of Rohwer and the art and artifacts spread around him on the walls and tables of a conference room in the Arkansas Studies Institute.

“A chunk of my boyhood was spent in this state.”

And yes, he agrees, the fact that he was such a young child does help ease the hard corners of the reality of those times. Times that got worse after the Takeis were transferred to a California camp, where George’s father refused to sign a tricky worded oath of loyalty to the United States because it would have required acknowledging a previous loyalty to the Emperor of Japan, which the senior Takei had simply never had. He was, after all, an American citizen.

In the years following the release of all Japanese-American internees, life was still hard. The family lived in impoverished, undesirable neighborhoods until they could get their feet back under them, Takei recalls. And as he got older, into junior high and high school, he finally began to feel anger for what had been done to his family by his government. It came to a head in high school, where what he was being taught about the rights of Americans didn’t match what he remembered about his boyhood.

“I was an arrogant teenager,” Takei says. “I challenged my father. I said we should’ve demonstrated against our situation. My father said, ‘I had you, your brother, your sister—they were pointing guns at us. I had to protect you.’”

Then Takei’s robust voice grows a little quieter, and he talks about the one guilt he carries with him from those arrogant days.

“I told my father, ‘You led us like sheep to the slaughter by taking us to those camps,’” he says. “Then he said, ‘Well, maybe you’re right.’ And he got up and went into his bedroom. He was deeply wounded by the internment, and here was his own kid, a decade later, subjecting him to that pain.”

Takei says he realized he should apologize to his father, but he couldn’t get up the nerve to do so that night. By the morning, the moment for apology had passed, he says, and it never came again before his father died.

“I never did apologize, and now I can’t,” he says.

But that is not the dominant memory of his talks with his father about the internment. Rather, Takei says, he holds most closely to the lessons he took from his father’s insistence that Takei learn about politics, study hard, take part in student government, and gain a true understanding of how it worked.

“It was the kind of discussion that focused on the ideals of the system, but he said the system was also made up of fallible people,” Takei recalls.

That meant they had an obligation to hold democracy’s feet to the fire, his father said, so that it remains true.

“This is the best system,” Norman Takei told his angry teenage son. “It has wounded us deeply. We have to work to make it better.”

It was more than a message, it was a mandate—and nearly sixty years later, George Takei is still taking it to heart.