



Herhold: Teen witnesses a wartime injustice

By **Scott Herhold**
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Before she died in October at the age of 79, Ruth Mix Campidonica carried the weight of the past with her. The sound of a firecracker would startle the vivacious and passionate San Jose drama coach. It reminded her of the gunshots she heard more than six decades ago.

At 15, Ruth volunteered at a place unknown to most teenagers of her era: the Gila River Internment Camp for Japanese-Americans, 50 miles southeast of Phoenix. It left her with a permanent sense of guilt - and a heightened dislike of injustice.

Today, her daughter, Claire Mix, is putting together a documentary about her mother's experience. You can see the opening scenes on her Web site, www.clairemix.com, including interviews with Ruth.

Family legacy

What's striking about the saga isn't just the well-documented unfairness toward Japanese-Americans, but the commitment of three generations of Caucasian women to righting it.

The story begins with Claire Mix's grandmother, Frida Mix, an early suffragist who left her teaching post in Washington state in 1942 to teach elementary classes at the Gila River camp. Frida, a cousin of the cowboy actor Tom Mix, was incensed at the government's wartime internment order and felt it was her responsibility to do something about it.

Frida brought her daughter, Ruth, then 15, with her. She lied about the girl's age so Ruth could volunteer at the camp on weekends and

in the summer while attending high school in Mesa.

"Grandmother told her that coming to the aid of people in need makes you look on humanity with changed eyes," Claire said.

Ruth worked as a nurse's aide in the maternity ward of the hospital at Butte camp, one of three at Gila River. Among the internees, the 5-foot-8 redhead was known as "the girl whose hair touches the sun," or "Taiyo" for short.

Though the first year was strict - American troops were on high alert and sometimes fired shots to dissuade would-be escapees - Ruth made friends easily. At the risk of serious penalty, she and her mother started a smuggling ring, bringing in food, soap, lotion, diapers and many rolls of contraband camera film.

Darker moments

There were darker moments, too. On the documentary, Ruth talks movingly about a stillborn birth she witnessed. Claire says her mother was haunted as well by the story of a sick Japanese woman named Miyoko, who died after asking Ruth to tell her children she loved them.

Several months before the end of the war, Ruth had to leave the camp because of a lung infection, though Frida stayed until the last internees were released. After attending Arizona State University, Ruth switched to San Jose State University and spent the bulk of her life - more than a half-century - here.

Ruth talked little about her war years. Claire says it wasn't until the early 1970s, when the two attended a San Jose lecture by George Takei (a former internee in Arkansas who became Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek"), that she discovered her mother's past.

Claire, who lives in Sacramento, is paying homage now. She's already written a screenplay about her mother, "The Girl with Hair like the Sun." And for the documentary, she hopes to talk to Japanese-Americans who remember Taiyo. If you can help, her e-mail is thesolo@sbcglobal.net.

Contact Scott Herhold at sherhold@mercurynews.com or (408) 275-0917. View his video blog at www.mercurynews.com/scottherhold.

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Ruth Mix at age 15, shortly before she began volunteering at the Gila... (courtesy claire mix)



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