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The Japanese American Family Behind Mendez v. Westminster: California's First Successful Desegregation Case

Many Orange County, California schoolchildren know the name "Mendez." After all, the iconic name is front and center of the landmark civil rights case that desegregated several of the county's public schools in 1947, preceding the 1954 *Brown v. Board* case on a national level. The Mendez family, one of five Latino families which challenged several school districts in the county on their practice of Mexican-only schools, had their name immortalized in history. But the Mendezes would not have been able to lead the legal charge if it was not for another family of color, the Munemitsu, the Japanese American farming family behind the story of the *Mendez v. Westminster*.

The Munemitsu Come to America

The first Munemitsu to arrive in the United States in the early 1900s eventually made his way to the South Bay of Los Angeles County, working as a hired laborer in a strawberry farm. These were the same farming skills he would later impart on two more generations of Munemitsu men and women. The Japanese were common fixtures of rural life in Southern California, but suffered through the indignities of barriers to citizenship and homeownership due to local and federal xenophobic legislation.

By 1931, the Munemitsu clan eventually migrated from the South Bay area to rural Orange County, where they acquired a farm in the next year. This generation was now led by patriarch Seima Munemitsu and wife Masako Morioka Munemitsu, with their boys Seiko and Saylo, and twin girls Kazuko and Akiko in tow, as well as a few other extended members of this growing brood. Seiko, or "Tad" as he was affectionately known by loved ones, legally owned the farm as an American-born citizen on behalf of his parents, a privilege Seima and Masako were not able to enjoy themselves. This was the case with many first-generation Japanese who immigrated to America and who were not able to own land in their name, due to the Alien Land Law of 1913. Many opted to purchase property in the name of their children in order to keep land in the family, just as the Munemitsu did. Owning a 40-acre farm, the clan would be known as one of the longtime strawberry growers in Orange County.

The December 7, 1941 imperial Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would implode the foundations of the Munemitsu family and other Japanese Americans living in the West and Southwest. With Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1942 anti-Japanese Executive Order 9066, ordering the incarceration of about 120,000 ethnic Japanese living in regions near the Pacific Ocean, the Munemitsu would be separated and interned. Seima, known as an influential leader in the Japanese community, was arrested first in 1942 and sent to incarceration camps administered by the Department of Justice (DOJ) in New Mexico and then Colorado. These DOJ camps were known to hold community leaders, political dissidents, and religious leaders. They were purposely cordoned off from their families and other relocation centers, so that their presence may not incite rebellion among the population.

Days after Seima was arrested, the rest of the family, Masako, Tad, Saylo, Kazuko, and Akiko were sent to the Poston War Relocation Center in Poston, Arizona. Tad and Saylo were young adults while the twins were only in grade school. With siblings who were underaged or attending school, and his mother and grandmother unable to work, as the oldest Tad took on the responsibility to work outside the camps to earn income for his family. He took on employment in Colorado, with permission from his Indefinite Leave Clearance, a document which could only be obtained after signing a loyalty questionnaire. Many internees had to make the same difficult decisions time and time again in the camps: attest to their American loyalty, to their country which incarcerated them—or proudly deny allegiance, but make the lives of themselves or their families more difficult.

During this time, Tad was still able to retain the 40-acre farm in Westminster, thanks to their ability to lease it while they were away. Tad was one of the lucky few Japanese Americans who were able to continue owning his land holdings from afar in internment. From the years of 1944 to 1946, in just three short years, the lives of two clans—the Mendezes and the Munemitsus, would experience nation-changing events that would influence the narrative of U.S. history.

The Mendez Family Moves to Westminster

In 1944, Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez, successful cantina owners, moved with their children from Santa Ana, California to Westminster. Renting out the home they owned in Santa Ana, they wanted to try their hand at farming and leased land from the Munemitsu family, who they met through a mutual friend. Felicitas, born in Puerto Rico, and her husband Gonzalo, born in Mexico, were no strangers to racial discrimination themselves. Though Puerto Rican, Felicitas was essentially seen as “Mexican” by California racial standards, and her children with Gonzalo would also be seen as such.

When Gonzalo’s sister, on behalf of Gonzalo and Felicitas, tried to enroll her niece and nephews—Sylvia, Gonzalo, Jr., and Jerome—into the whites-only 17th Street Elementary School in Westminster, she was indignant to find out that they would not be admitted. Instead only her own lighter-skinned children, with her European married surname, would be allowed enrollment. This racial exclusion would set off a civil rights battle against the school district led by the Mendez family.

When the Westminster School District Board refused to integrate Mexican American students as a whole into their whites-only schools, Gonzalo and Felicitas led community efforts to make change in the whole county. They did all this while continuing to cultivate the land they were living on. Gonzalo began working with four other Mexican American families—the Estradas, Gomezes, Palominos, and Ramirez— to challenge the segregation policies. Together, the parents of these clans acted as plaintiffs and filed a lawsuit in federal court against multiple public school districts in Orange County.

Known formally as *Mendez, et al v. Westminster School District of Orange County, et al*, this federal lawsuit was argued in the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles in February 1946, where Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled in favor of the five families, stating, “A paramount requisite in

the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage." The school district did not see it that way, and appealed the case, taking it all the way to the Ninth Federal Circuit Court of Appeals based out of San Francisco. There too, the decision was upheld in April of 1947 that the 14th Amendment was violated and that students of Mexican-descent were denied equal protection. Thus, Mexican-only schools were abolished in the Orange County school districts.

Where does the Munemitsu family play into this story? If it was not for the farming lease between Tad and Gonzalo, the case would not have existed. In 1944 and 1945, both men signed two 1-year leases which would allow the Mendez family to continue living on Munemitsu land and to continue harvesting their asparagus. If the Munemitsus had not been forced to leave their home, the Mendezes would not have been able to lease the farm, have their children unfairly rejected from enrollment at the local school, and would not have led the legal charge for the civil rights of their community's Mexican students. Because of the injustices first inflicted on one family of color, injustices inflicted on another family, and multitudes of others, were able to be righted.

The Munemitsu Family Returns

With the August 1945 U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the death knell of World War II would sound, and so would the bell toll for the lives of hundreds of thousands of Japanese nationals. Ironically, the incalculable loss and destruction felt by those in Japan would free those of shared ancestry across the Pacific: The Munemitsus, now joined by Seima who was reunited with his family in 1944, left the Poston War Relocation Center in September 1945. Tad, working in Colorado, would be reunited with his family after they left Poston.

In the month prior, in August, Tad had signed a lease granting Gonzalo another year to work the farm. With the Munemitsus returning soon, and the Mendezes living in the main house, a curious arrangement was agreed upon. According to the August 1945 lease, Tad requested the following:

"Buildings on the ranch are to be used as dwellings by the lessor [Tad Munemitsu] for the dwelling of his family or any person he designates" without cost or charge of rent. Also, lessee [Gonzalo Mendez] agrees to "furnish the lessor and his family with such work as is available on and around the farm herein leased and to pay the minimum of prevailing wages to each person so employed."

In the last year the Mendez family lived on and worked this land in Westminster, so too did the Munemitsus in the first year of their return. In fact, as the document relates, the Munemitsus worked for Gonzalo until the summer of 1946, likely living in the buildings their own former farmhands lived in. They may not have been living in their house but they were *home*, and away from the army barracks they were forced to inhabit for the last few years.

The Legacies of Two Families

The ruling of *Mendez v. Westminster* did not end segregation in public schools in all of California, nor in the country but it contributed to its end. Future U.S. Associate Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer representing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, cited the *Mendez* case as precedent in the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board*, which deemed racial segregation unconstitutional across the U.S.

Sylvia Mendez, one of the three Mendez children denied entry into her local Westminster school, to this day carries on her parents' legacy in her advocacy of education for all children and in her retelling of her family's story. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented by President Barack Obama in 2011.

Janice Munemitsu, daughter of Tad Munemitsu, also helps carry on the *Mendez v. Westminster* legacy. She and Sylvia are currently involved in the Mendez Historic Freedom Trail and Monument in Westminster. In collaboration with the Orange County Department of Education and the City of Westminster, this project will highlight the fight for justice for all people of color.

Annie Tang is the Coordinator of Special Collections and Archives at the Frank Mt. Pleasant Library of Special Collections and Archives at the Leatherby Libraries of Chapman University. She manages the Munemitsu-Sasaki Family Collection. Special thanks goes out to Janice Munemitsu and former Special Collections and Archives intern Kathy Morgan, who provided the research regarding the family papers.