

*Return to
Heart Mountain:
Grandfather
Ojichan's Stones*

by Kenneth Sakatani



One summer day a number of years ago, my wife Candy and I were having a conversation about family legacy keepsakes with my late mother, Ruth (Arita) Sakatani, at her home in Chino, California.

My mother suddenly shared, "The only thing my father left me was a bag of rocks. Dad brought it back from camp, but I never opened it."

By "camp" my mother was referring to the "Heart Mountain Relocation Center," as it was officially known, where her parents and family, including herself, her husband, my father, James Kiyoto Sakatani, my brother, Terry, and sister, Linda, were forcibly removed from California and incarcerated during World War II along with over 10,000 other Japanese Americans.

Sumijiro Arita, my mother's father and my grandfather, *ojichan*, was an active member and leader in the Southern California Japanese Issei community before World War II. Sumijiro was picked up by the FBI on December 8, 1941, just one day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He was placed in federal detention without charge, first at Tuna Canyon Detention Station, Tujunga, California, then at Fort Missoula Internment Camp, Montana, and later at Lordsburg Internment Camp, New Mexico. Eventually, he was paroled and sent to join his wife and family at the Heart Mountain camp sometime in 1943.

The "bag of rocks" my mother described were small rocks and stones my grandfather collected while he was imprisoned at Fort Missoula. Sumijiro had carried this bag from one prison camp to another until finally ending up at the Heart Mountain confinement site.

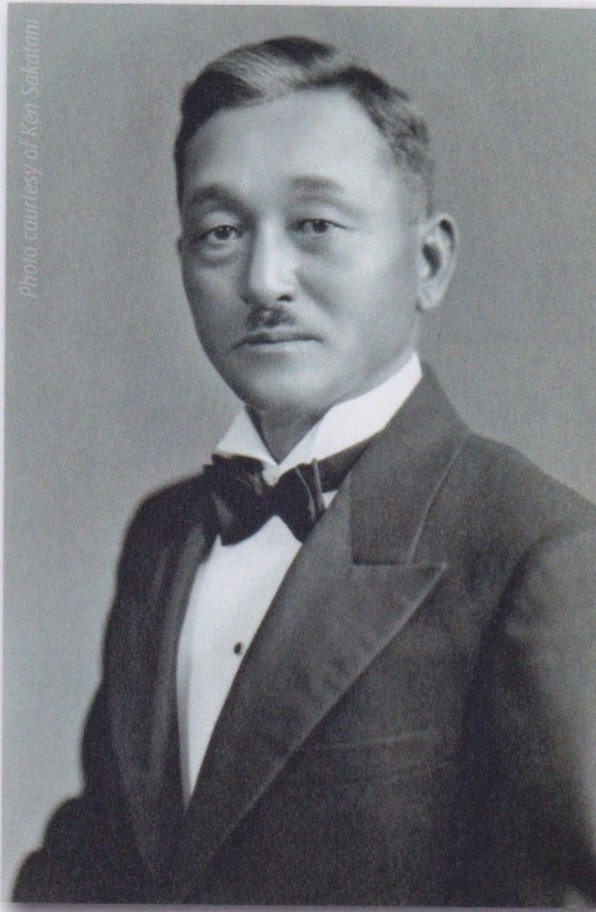


Photo courtesy of Ken Sakatani

Sumijiro Arita, age 47 (1934)

We were surprised that my mother had never opened her father's keepsake bag after leaving Heart Mountain. With her permission, we found the cloth bag, tightly tied-up, inside a worn cardboard box underneath her bed. We could feel the stones inside the bag as we carried it outside to the backyard. Untying the bag, we upended the contents onto the concrete patio floor.

An unexpected cloud of dust was suddenly released along with the small rocks and stones that came spilling out from the bag. After being confined for so many years, this cloud of dry dust hung suspended and then slowly rose up to escape into the warm afternoon air. For

an ethereal moment, we were all transfixed and transported back in time to memories of a painful past. As the dust settled, there lay at our feet a pile of these beautiful rocks and stones, in a variety of colors, textures, and sizes. My mother allowed us to take the bag of my grandfather's rocks and stones for safekeeping.

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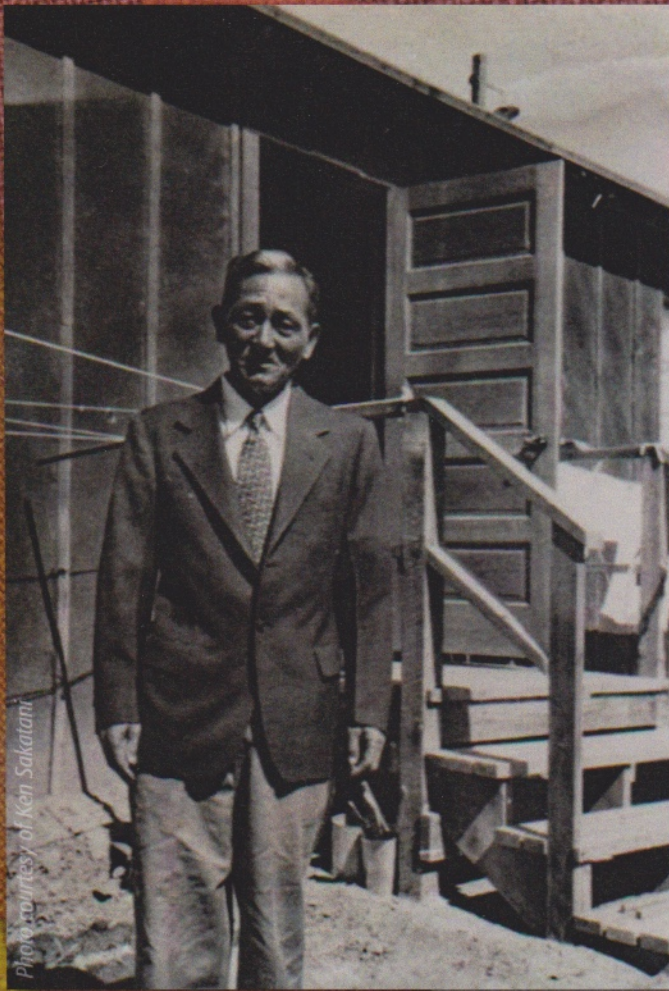


Photo courtesy of Ken Sakatani

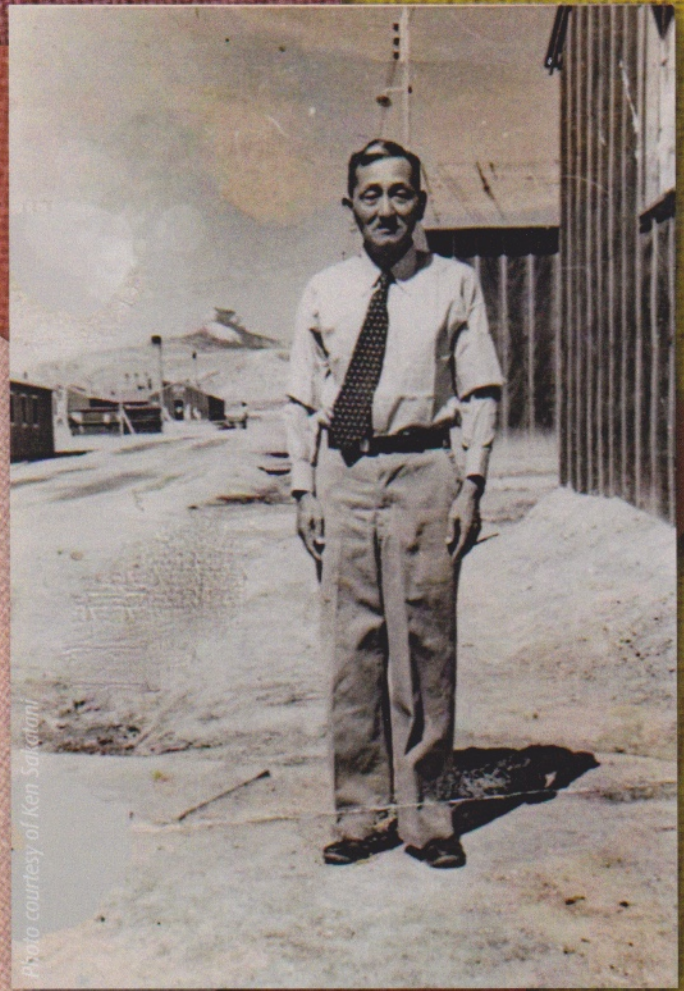


Photo courtesy of Ken Sakatani





Photo courtesy of Caitlin Takeda

In 2019, I had an opportunity as a Sansei Japanese American born outside the Heart Mountain camp to attend my first Heart Mountain Pilgrimage. I decided to bring some of the stones back as a symbol of remembrance and healing to honor the memory of my grandfather, Sumijiro Arita. It was during the Pilgrimage weekend that my second cousin, Bacon Sakatani, encouraged me to write this article when I told him about my intention to place the stones in that setting. Bacon, known as “Mr. Heart Mountain,” was incarcerated there as a young boy, and has been intimately involved in many of the reunions and Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation activities.

Thus, it was early Saturday morning of the Pilgrimage that my cousin, Cathy (Arita) Takeda, her husband, Daniel, and their daughter, Caitlin drove me to the interpretive center. Cathy’s father (and my uncle) Harry Arita was also incarcerated at Heart Mountain. With Heart Mountain itself as a background, amidst the sagebrush and scrub on the semi-arid land, we created a small altar shrine using my grandfather’s stones and origami paper cranes. Caitlin, a Yonsei Japanese American, documented our ceremony through photography, honoring her great grandfather.

Before the war, Sumijiro Arita had been a prosperous farmer and popular Issei community leader, but the long imprisonment in the federal detention centers had taken a toll on his body, mind, and spirit. While at Heart Mountain, my grandfather hardly left the barracks where he and his family were housed, eating his meals there, alone, and isolating himself from all camp activities. Even after the war, while returning to farm in Southern California,



Photo courtesy of Ken Sakatani

Above: Cathy, Daniel, & Caitlyn Takeda in front of Heart Mountain with Sumijiro’s stones

Left: Cousins Ken and Bacon Sakatani at the 2019 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage


Opposite page: Sumijiro Arito at Heart Mountain



Ken Sakatani prepares to place his grandfather's stones below Heart Mountain.

Photo by Caitlin Takeda

my grandfather never again involved himself in the civic affairs of the Japanese American community, let alone American society at large.

I believe the bag of rocks and stones, which he carried with him throughout his ordeal, was his "burden of shame and anger" of unjust imprisonment and broken dreams. At the precise moment when my cousins and I completed the altar shrine, the sun broke through the overcast sky and rays of light played on the face and sides of Heart Mountain. I would like to imagine the spirit of my grandfather *ojichan*, Sumijiro Arita, was shining down in gratitude and blessing, released from his imprisonment after these many years. 



Ken Sakatani is an artist and former professor of art and art education,

who resides in San Francisco. His parents, siblings and relatives were incarcerated at the Heart Mountain.



Caitlin Takeda is a *Yonsei* artist, activist, and medical student from Ventura County, CA.

She sits on the steering committee of Tsuru For Solidarity and is pursuing an MD-ScM at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, with an interest in women's health.