

The Courage of Ralph Lawrence Carr

By Dennis Payton Knight

In 1999, the Denver Post named him Colorado's "Citizen of the Century." Had I been around sixty years earlier when he ran for governor in 1939, he likely wouldn't have even gotten my vote because he was a conservative opposed to the New Deal that was lifting folks much like me from the Great Depression.

I am fascinated by the story of Ralph Carr instead because of the legacy of courage he left for my son, whose ancestry on his mother's side is of pioneers from Japan who came to help build our state a century ago. Maybe he should be an example for modern politicians, too.

Carr was born in 1887 in Rosita, a mining town in Custer County. He grew up in Cripple Creek and, after earning his law degree, settled in Antonito, practicing law there for more than a decade. He moved his practice to Denver, and in 1929 President Hoover appointed him to be the United States Attorney for Colorado.

He was governor in 1942 when, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the government, under President Roosevelt's executive order, uprooted over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans from farms, businesses and homes on the West Coast to move them to "relocation centers" in California and states to the East.

That did not sit well with Wyoming's Governor Nels Smith who said if anyone of Japanese descent came to his state, they'd be "hanging from every pine tree." Governor Ratner of Kansas proclaimed, "Japs are not wanted and not welcome in Kansas," and he would call out his National Guard to keep them from crossing his border.

Colorado's Governor Carr did not like Roosevelt's order either, but for a very opposite reason. "Now that's wrong," he said, "Some of these Japanese are citizens of the United States." He said the Constitution's principles must be protected "for every man or we shall not have it to protect any man." In a later speech, he declared,

"They are not going to take over the vegetable business of this state, and they are not going to take over the Arkansas Valley. But the Japanese are protected by the same Constitution that protects us. An American citizen of Japanese descent has the same rights as any other citizen.... If you harm them, you must first harm me. I was brought up in small towns where I knew the shame and dishonor of race hatred. I grew to despise it because it threatened the happiness of you, and you, and you."

Carr welcomed the Japanese at the Colorado border, and it cost him the election when he ran for the U.S. Senate later in 1942. He ran again for Governor after eight years but died a month before the election. Today he is memorialized with a statue at Sakura Square downtown, and our new Colorado Supreme Court building is very rightly named for Colorado's Citizen of the Twentieth Century, Governor Ralph Lawrence Carr.