

# DEFINING MOMENTS JAPANESE-AMERICAN INTERNMENT DURING WORLD WAR II



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*Omnigraphics*

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# Chapter Four

## LIFE IN THE CAMPS



Our camp, they tell us, is now to be called a ‘relocation center’ and not a “concentration camp.” We are internees, not prisoners.... Here’s the truth: I am now called a non-alien, stripped of my constitutional rights. I am a prisoner in a concentration camp in my own country. I sleep on a canvas cot under which is a suitcase with my life’s belongings: a change of clothes, underwear, a notebook and pencil. Why?

—Kiyō Sato, recalling her experience at Poston internment camp in *Kiyō’s Story: A Japanese American Family’s Quest for the American Dream*

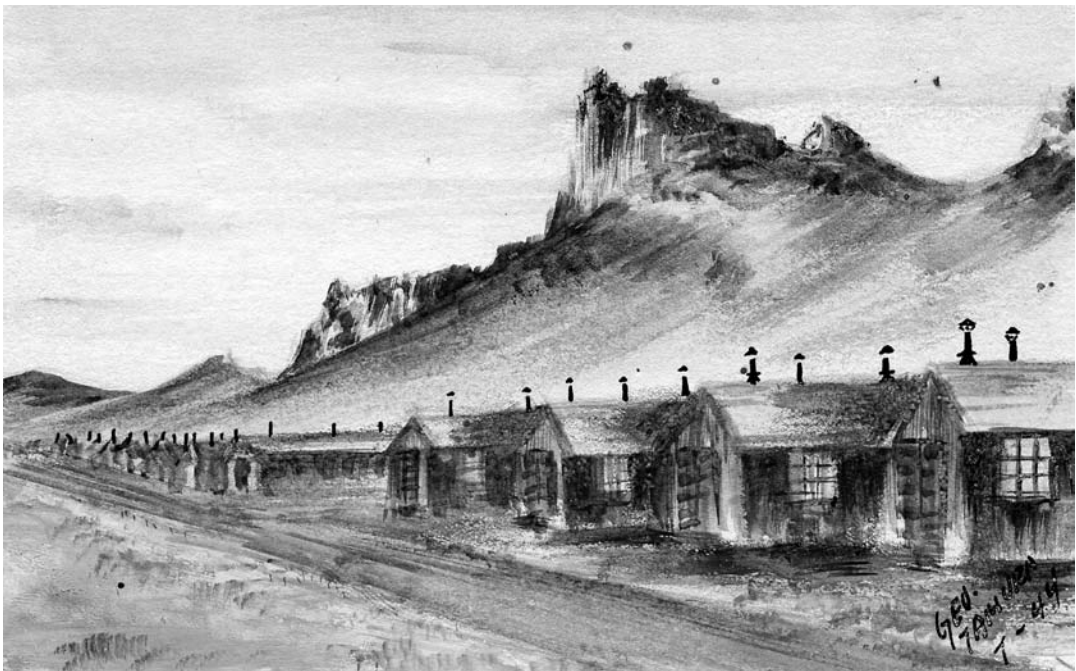
**T**he War Relocation Authority (WRA) established the internment camps in isolated, inhospitable parts of the western United States. “All ten [internment camp] sites can only be called godforsaken,” wrote historian Roger Daniels. “They were in places where nobody had lived before and no one has lived since.”<sup>1</sup>

Most internees struggled to adjust to the camps. People who were used to city life or the temperate climate of rural and coastal California suddenly found themselves in the middle of the desert, high in the mountains, or surrounded by miles of swampland. Camp experiences were often defined by the harsh landscape and climate of these locations. Every internment camp was also surrounded by barbed wire fencing and featured towers staffed by armed guards. These fences and towers quickly became grim symbols of injustice to the internees.

### Herded into Remote Corners of the West

Most of the ten internment camps established to hold Japanese Americans were located in the deserts of the American West. Poston was the largest camp, both in terms of acreage and the number of internees it held. This camp was located in a desolate expanse of Yuma County in southwestern Arizona. More than 18,000 people were housed in the three communities of Poston, known simply as Poston I, II, and III. In recognition of the daytime desert temperatures, which sometimes rose as high as 130°F in the summer, camp internees referred to the three different areas as Poston, Toastin' and Roastin' (see "A Young Internee Provides a Glimpse of Life in Poston," p. 176).

Terrible dust storms regularly hit the desert camps of Poston, Gila River, Manzanar, Tule Lake, and Topaz. These storms obscured visibility and clogged internees' noses and throats with dirt. Yoshiko Uchida described the conditions in Topaz in her memoir *The Invisible Thread*. "Coming as we did from the mild climate of California, none of us felt well in the desert," she wrote. "Mornings began with freez-



This watercolor painting of the bleak Tule Lake Internment Center was made by internee George Tamura in 1944.

ing temperatures, and afternoons soared into the eighties and nineties. The altitude (4,600 feet above sea level) made us light-headed, and lack of proper refrigeration for our food brought about an immediate rash of food poisoning.”<sup>2</sup>

The Tule Lake camp was located in the mountains of northern California. Dry and dusty, it acquired its name from a long-gone ancient lake. The terrain at Tule Lake was forbidding, with no trees to shelter the camp from the weather. Tule Lake residents endured extreme temperature variations from summer to winter, and sometimes even on the same day. Granada had been built in another desert-like location, on the plains of southeast Colorado. In that camp, residents often encountered rattlesnakes, scorpions, and coyotes. Extreme weather presented another challenge at Amache, as internee Robert Kashiwagi recalled. “It hit 25 below zero. And one has to be very familiar how to live in areas of below zero ... because you just don’t grab the doorknobs without being careful. Otherwise, you leave all your skin on the doorknob.”<sup>3</sup>

Internment camp Jerome was located in the swamps of Arkansas. Residents there were taught to identify and avoid many different poisonous snakes found in the vicinity, including water moccasins and copperheads. Manzanar was located to the east of the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Mountains, isolated from the California coast (see “A Sixth-Grader Describes Her Arrival at Manzanar,” p. 174). Internees assigned to this camp suffered through stiflingly hot summer days and shivered during the winter nights, when icy winds tore through the poorly insulated and inadequately heated barracks.

As the relocation progressed and more internees arrived in each camp, the swelling populations turned each site into a makeshift city. Official residential capacities of the internment camps ranged from 8,000 to 20,000 people, but it was not unusual for camps to exceed these official limits. Manzanar quickly became the largest populated area between Los Angeles, California, and Reno, Nevada, and Utah’s Topaz internment camp grew into the fifth-largest populated area in the state. Women made up about half of the internment camps’ population, and about one-quarter of camp residents were school-aged children.

### **Making a Home in Military Barracks**

The housing facilities of each internment camp were constructed by the Army, according to Army specifications. Residents were housed in barracks like those used for the soldiers on Army bases of that era. The barest of modifications were made to the barracks buildings in order to accommodate the fami-



This map shows the location of the War Relocation Centers that the U.S. military established for internees during World War II. The shaded area along the West Coast shows the exclusion zone from which all people of Japanese ancestry were evacuated during the war.

lies who were interned together. Instead of one large room intended for use by many individuals, internment camp barracks buildings contained six separate rooms. Each of these rooms was approximately twenty by twenty-five feet. The only furnishings provided were standard Army sleeping cots made of canvas.

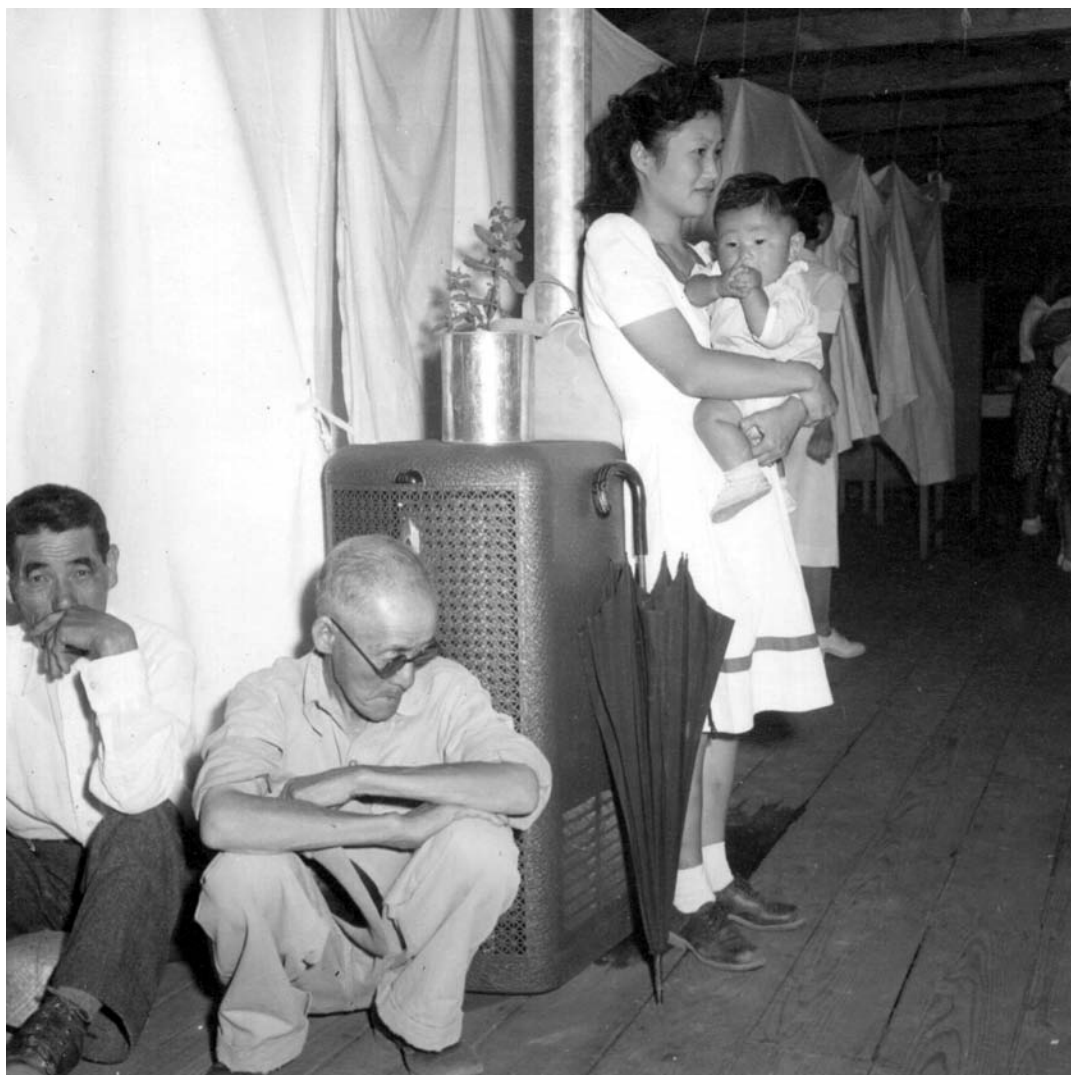


The camps' housing barracks were constructed quickly in order to speed the process of relocating the internees. As a result, interior walls were made of exposed two-by-four support frames, and there were gaps in the exterior siding and between the floor boards. Most internees took it upon themselves to improve their new temporary homes, using lumber, scrap wood, and other supplies left behind by Army construction crews. Residents built interior walls, patched the gaps in the floors, and added shelves and window shutters. Some residents painted or papered the interior walls, while others sewed curtains to cover windows and to partition sleeping areas from sitting areas.

Once the barracks' structures were improved, residents began to outfit their rooms with tables, chairs, storage trunks, dressers, and other furniture they could make with the leftover building materials. Those who could not build their own furniture sometimes bartered with other residents or received furnishings as gifts from others. Asayo Noji recalled that her father occupied much of his time at the camp by making items from scrap wood. "Papa spent most of his time in carpentry," she said. "He built a lot of furniture for our apartment, including a double-decker bed to save space, a heavy dresser with drawers, a lamp, and a folding screen decorated with carvings and a Japanese scene.... Papa gave away little tables and a lot of wooden vases—all shapes and sizes. He felt so much joy giving away his handcrafted goods."<sup>4</sup>

Although the internees worked energetically to make their temporary homes as livable as possible, the barracks remained unwelcoming. Windows in the barracks were small in both number and size, and they were not equipped with electric fans or air conditioning. As a result, the interiors of these buildings became extremely hot in the summer. During the cold months, meanwhile, internees frequently did not receive the necessary fuel for their wood or oil stoves to adequately heat their rooms. In some cases, families of internees arrived at camps, only to find that the heating stoves meant to keep them warm had not even been installed. "My feet were cold and my nose felt icy," remembered Yoshiko Uchida, whose family was sent to the Topaz internment camp. "It was no wonder. When I got up, I found a thin layer of ice on top of the water in our kettle. We had been issued a potbellied stove, but it wasn't doing us any good. Like everyone else's, it was sitting outside, covered with dust, waiting for the work crews to come install it."<sup>5</sup>

Barracks housing also provided little privacy for residents. Rooms had no kitchens, no running water, and no bathrooms. Internees ate in military-style mess halls and used communal laundry rooms, showers, and latrines. The latrines were particularly dehumanizing for residents because they allowed for no personal pri-



Internees gather around a heater in one of the Manzanar camps. Note the sheets used as room partitions in the background.

vacy. Latrines in the internment camps were big open rooms equipped with rows of toilets arranged back to back, and with no partitions between them.

Many internees recalled the absence of privacy as one of the worst aspects of life in the internment camps. “There were lines for everything: for mail, shots, at the pharmacy and clinic, at the mess halls,” remembered Wakako Yamauchi,

a Poston internee who later became a well-known Japanese-American playwright, painter, and poet. “There were lines for toilets, showers, and laundry tubs. Everything was communal. No secret was safe. Every cough and quarrel was heard in the next barrack. Only the trauma of betrayal continued silently.”<sup>6</sup>

### Shortcomings in Food and Nutrition

Internees ate meals together in communal mess halls at regularly scheduled times each day. Internees used rough benches and long tables that accommodated dozens of people at a time. These impersonal arrangements made it difficult for families to preserve personal traditions or engage in the sort of intimate dinner table conversations that help keep family members connected to one another.

Camp food was provided by the War Relocation Authority according to a budget of forty cents per day for each internee.<sup>7</sup> This was hardly sufficient even for that era, and most of the food served to internees was neither good nor nutritious, especially in the first two years of the war. In the first year of operation, in fact, most internment camp meals consisted of surplus food from the Army, including hot dogs, kidney meat, potatoes, and ketchup. In some camps, internees were served a canned meat known as Spam for weeks at a time. Other foods that were rationed for the general population in the United States during World War II became almost impossible to get in the internment camps. For example, sugar was generally not available in the camps, and so there were no sweets or candy. Milk was tightly rationed as well. At Topaz, for example, the only internees who received milk were children under twelve years of age—and even they only received six ounces per day.<sup>8</sup>

As time passed and internees demanded better food, traditional Japanese staples such as rice and tea were made available. Camp residents also began to organize their own food production. Internees grew their own vegetables and fruit, despite the fact that the soil and climate at many of the camps was not well-suited to farming. Some internees also received permission to raise chickens, pigs, beef cattle, and dairy cattle.

Many internees had experience in farming barren or neglected land before the relocation, so they were able to establish remarkably productive farms fairly quickly. Manza-

*“Feelings of restlessness and frustration were spreading throughout camp like a disease,” said one internee.*

*“Isolated and imprisoned, we had lost our dignity as human beings.”*



Japanese-American internees, such as these men and women at Tule Lake, supplemented their food provisions with crops they grew themselves.

nar, for example, was located near the site of a large fruit orchard that had been abandoned due to a water shortage. Manzanar internees built an irrigation system, pruned the trees, and brought the orchard back to life. By the end of the first growing season, they were harvesting baskets of apples and pears to supplement the meals from the mess hall. Farmers in Manzanar also grew acres of corn, turnips, cucumbers, and other vegetables for use in the camp's kitchens. By 1943, almost all of the internment camps had some sort of farming operation in place. These gardens and livestock operations eventually met a good percentage of the year-round fruit, vegetable, beef, poultry, and pork needs of several camps.

### Keeping Busy with Work and School

The camps' isolation from the outside world could be very difficult for internees to handle emotionally. Many Japanese-American inmates coped with this isolation, as well as the overall dark turn in their fortunes, by trying to cobble together daily routines that reminded them of their old, pre-war lives. "The Japanese Americans worked to set up a generally stable small-town existence with fire and police departments, newspapers, and baseball teams," noted one study of the internment camps. "Internees were encouraged to assume responsibility for many phases of community management, but it was always clear who was in charge. Caucasian WRA employees headed by a project director set the basic policies of each camp."<sup>9</sup> Still, some WRA administrators permitted internees to set up government councils and departments to manage many of the camps' daily affairs.

Work was one of the primary means by which adult internees kept themselves busy and retained a sense of identity and pride. Most Japanese Americans in the camps were given the option of working at a variety of jobs. Most of these tasks were necessary for the operation of the camp, and many of them relied on the specialized skills of individual internees. For example, internees who were doctors, dentists, nurses, or pharmacists worked in the camp hospital. Those who had been teachers employed their skills and background in the camp schools. Others worked as journalists or graphic artists for the camp newspapers. Pastors and other religious leaders formed churches in the camps. Internees also worked in building maintenance, the camp kitchens, camp post offices, as camp electricians, and in a wide range of other jobs related to their pre-internment occupations. All workers were paid a nominal wage according to their position and skills.

Some internees even carried out work that directly supported the American war effort. Many women internees, for example, weaved large camouflage

## The Boredom and Restlessness of Internment Camp Life

**Y**oshiko Uchida was near the end of her studies at the University of California at Berkeley when her plans were interrupted by the mandatory evacuation order. She was interned in Topaz, Utah, with her family. Uchida worked as a teacher in the camp's school. In 1943 Uchida and her sister were allowed to leave Topaz for resettlement in New York City, where Uchida went on to become a highly regarded writer. In her memoir *The Invisible Thread*, Uchida describes the boredom and restlessness of her time in Topaz:

I tried to keep busy. I worked hard at school and faithfully attended all the teachers' meetings and seminars. I wrote to friends scattered in concentration camps all over the United States.... I learned how to knit. I went to art classes. I read every book I could find. I sang in the church choir. I played cards or went to an occasional movie at the canteen with my friends. I went to birthday parties and even to a wedding. I had an impacted wisdom tooth removed. I fell on the unpaved roads. I lost my voice from the dust. I was tired of having people around me constantly.... I felt as though I couldn't bear being locked up one more day. I wanted to go out into the world and live a real life.

### Source

Uchida, Yoshiko. *The Invisible Thread*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1995, p. 110.

nets for the Army. In desert camps, Japanese-American farmers grew guayule. This plant is a natural source of rubber, which was highly valued for use in the production of tires for military trucks, jeeps, and airplanes. Since the United States grappled with rubber shortages for much of the war, the guayule generated at the internment camps was welcomed by the U.S. military.

For younger internees, school provided a sense of normalcy and stability in a world that in many other ways had been turned upside down. The WRA provided education for school-aged children in all of the internment camps. Each camp operated its own schools, with classes for pre-school-aged children through high school. All children were required to attend classes when school was in session.

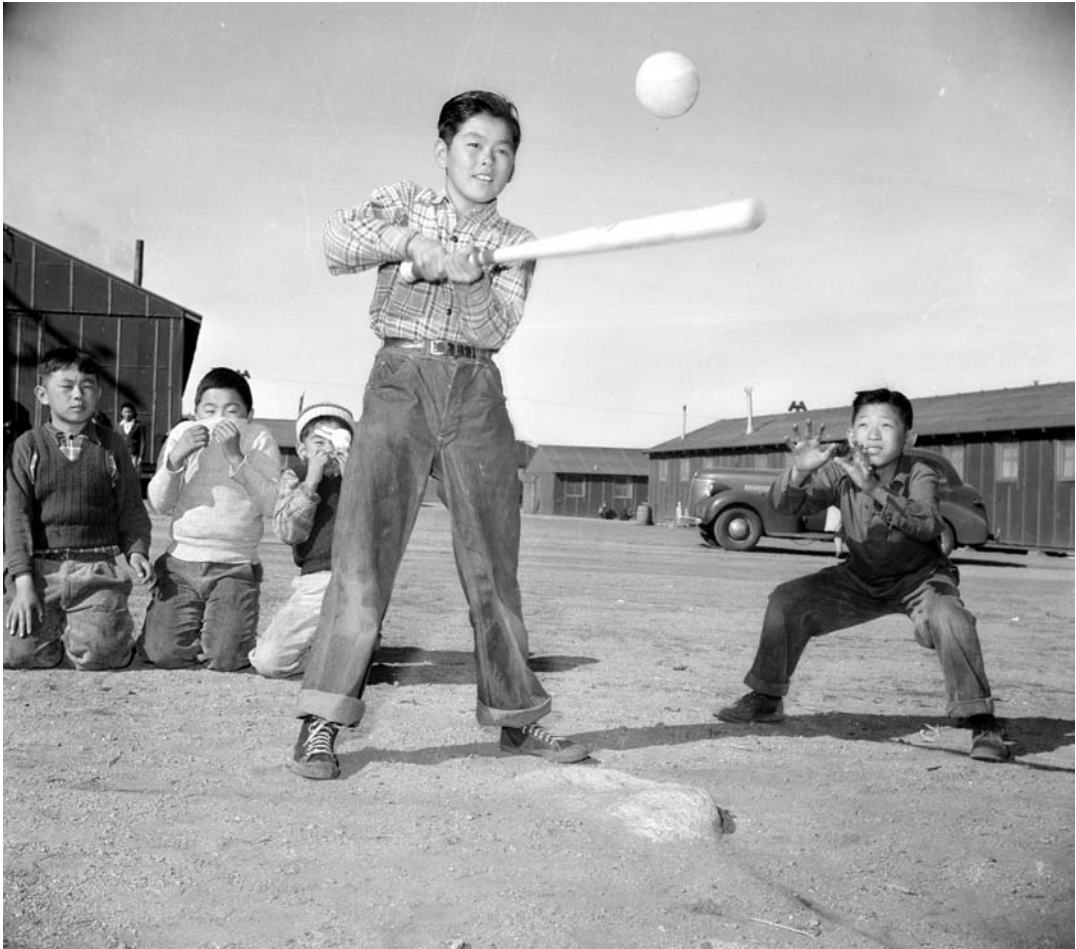
The internment camp schools, however, received meager classroom resources. Basic materials like books, paper, and pencils were scarce in many of the camp schools. As a result, teachers frequently solicited donations of supplies from camp residents and sometimes from friends outside the camps who could send supplies by mail. Teachers also had to prepare and furnish their own classrooms, which were sometimes located in unfinished barracks or sheds. Adult education classes were also provided in some camps. Some *Issei* took advantage of these classes to learn English, while others studied general subjects such as American history or geography.

### Recreation and Leisure

Recreation and leisure activities were mainly organized by the internees and included a wide range of pursuits. One of the most popular activities of internees was to grow and tend gardens around their own barracks buildings. They grew these flowers and vegetables from seeds they brought with them to



Students studying biology at a high school set up in one of the relocation centers.



Boys enjoying a game of baseball at the Manzanar Relocation Center in February 1943.

the camp or ordered through the mail. For many Japanese-American families in the camps, the introduction of colorful flower beds, small trees, and other greenery provided a welcome touch of beauty to their otherwise ugly and harsh surroundings.

Older *Issei* also passed the time by practicing traditional Japanese crafts such as making and arranging paper flowers, writing haiku poetry, and painting. Many internees who had never pursued art before the relocation took up drawing, painting, or writing poetry in camp. Younger *Nisei* played team sports like basketball, football, baseball, and volleyball. Internees also organized classes to teach art,



sewing, knitting, crochet, embroidery, wood carving, and many other subjects to their fellow inmates. All kinds of clubs were formed around recreational interests, such as playing card games, singing, and dancing. Choir performances, concerts, dances, and educational talks also were given by internees, and administrators at a few of the camps occasionally arranged to show movies for internees.

### Tension and Violence in the Camps

Most internees lived quietly and peacefully in the camps, but some young Japanese-American men in particular struggled to contain their anger and frustration at being imprisoned (see “Bitterness and Disillusionment at Poston,” p. 176). Internee Lili Sasaki summarized the general discontent within the camps. “The trouble was, we were all for Roosevelt. We voted for him. He was the best president we had in a long time. We didn’t want to, but we said, ‘If that’s what Roosevelt said, I’d be willing to go into camp....’ So when we got into camp, we wanted Roosevelt to take a stand and tell us what he intended to do with us. How come we’re Americans and we had to go into camp? Why?”<sup>10</sup> Yoshiko Uchida was in her senior year at the University of California at Berkeley when she and her family were interned at Topaz. Uchida recalled that “feelings of restlessness and frustration [spread] throughout camp like a disease. Isolated and imprisoned, we had lost our dignity as human beings. Having also lost control of our own lives and destiny, we couldn’t help but feel depressed and helpless.”<sup>11</sup>

In late 1944 tensions exploded into outbreaks of violence in several camps. Some workers protested the low wages they were being paid, while other internees demanded better—and more—food in the mess halls. Heated arguments between internees turned into fighting. In one camp, workers went on strike when camp administrators would not allow a public funeral for an internee who was killed in an accident. Riots also broke out in several camps when internees discovered that white camp employees were stealing truckloads of food meant for the mess halls.

Unrest among internees took its darkest turn at Tule Lake, the camp that housed those internees who had been identified by the War Relocation Authority as potentially dangerous enemies of America. In that camp, a group of 5,000 internees protested the poor living conditions endured by residents. When these efforts came to naught, several small but radical protest groups were established by defiant inmates. The most enduring of these organizations was *Hokoku Seinen*



The bugle corps of *Hokoku Seinen Dan* (Young Men's Organization to Serve Our Mother Country) conduct a ceremony to honor members who are undergoing forced transfer from Tule Lake to an internment camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in early 1945.

*Dan* (Young Men's Organization to Serve Our Mother Country), which grew to include hundreds of members. This group operated as a gang in the camp and used intimidation to recruit young men to its side. The organization pushed an agenda of loyalty to Japan and its culture—and renunciation of citizenship and other ties to the United States. Not surprisingly, these attitudes produced repeated demands from group leaders that internees be given the right to return to Japan. After World War II, some members of the group returned to Japan. Others ultimately chose to stay in the United States.

In October 1943, internee protests over the accidental death of a farm worker turned so violent that U.S. officials declared martial law throughout the camp. The Army took control of Tule Lake and enforced order with machine guns and tanks. Then in May 1944, a Tule Lake sentry shot and killed internee Shoichi James Okamoto. The killing was found to be unjustified, and the sen-

try was punished with a fine of one dollar—for the unauthorized use of a bullet that was the property of the U.S. government.

In this environment of growing unrest, the War Relocation Authority began to reconsider the feasibility of maintaining the internment camps for the duration of the war. WRA director Dillon Myer had been recommending the closure of the internment camps since September 1942. In his March 1943 annual report on the activities of the WRA, Myer declared that the internment camps were “unnatural and un-American.” He then repeated his call to shut down the camps (see “Report on the Work of the War Relocation Authority,” p. 181). Myer’s report was convincing, and the leadership of the War Relocation Authority and other government officials began to debate plans for moving internees out of the camps.

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## Notes

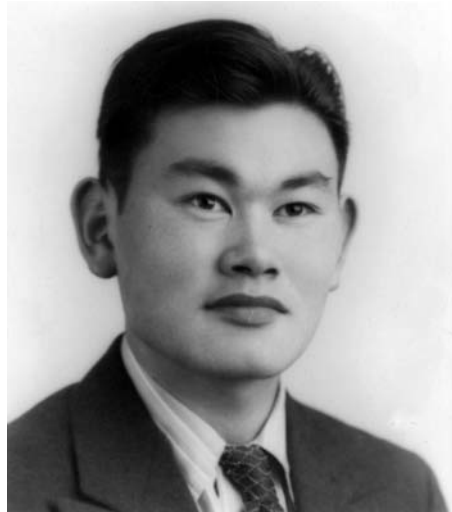
- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Fremon, David K. *Japanese-American Internment*. Springfield, NJ: Enslow, 1996, p. 54.
- <sup>2</sup> Uchida, Yoshiko. *The Invisible Thread*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1995, p. 96.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in “The War at Home: Civil Rights—Japanese Americans.” PBS, September 2007. Retrieved from [http://www.pbs.org/thewar/at\\_home\\_civil\\_rights\\_japanese\\_american.htm](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/at_home_civil_rights_japanese_american.htm).
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gordon, Linda, and Gary Y. Okihiro. *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006, p. 72.
- <sup>5</sup> Uchida, p. 96.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Higa, Karin M. *The View from Within: Japanese American Art from the Internment Camps, 1942-1945*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992, p. 68.
- <sup>7</sup> Myer, Dillon S. “News Release: Work of the War Relocation Authority, An Anniversary Statement.” March 1943. Retrieved from [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/japanese\\_internment/documents/index.php?documentdate=1943-03-00&documentid=16&studycollectionid=JI&pagenumber=1](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/japanese_internment/documents/index.php?documentdate=1943-03-00&documentid=16&studycollectionid=JI&pagenumber=1).
- <sup>8</sup> “Weenie Royale: Food and the Japanese.” National Public Radio, December 20, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2007/12/20/17335538/weenie-royale-food-and-the-japanese-internment>.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in “Behind the Fence: Life in the Internment Camp.” *Life on the Home Front: Oregon Responds to World War II*. Oregon State Archives, 2008. Retrieved from <http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/exhibits/ww2/threat/internment.htm>.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Gesensway, Deborah, and Mindy Roseman. *Beyond Words: Images from America's Concentration Camps*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Uchida, p. 113.

### Fred Korematsu (1919-2005)

*Activist Who Challenged Japanese-American Internment during World War II*

**F**red Toyosaburo Korematsu was born on January 30, 1919, in Oakland, California. His parents were Japanese immigrants who operated a plant nursery. He was the third of four sons.

Korematsu was twenty-two years old and working as a welder in an Oakland shipyard when Japanese warplanes attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. The United States responded to the devastating surprise attack by declaring war on Japan and formally entering World War II. Korematsu immediately decided to join the military. He tried to enlist in the U.S. National Guard, but he was refused because of his Japanese ancestry. Korematsu then tried to enlist in the U.S. Coast Guard, but he was turned away again.



At that time, many Americans viewed people of Japanese descent with suspicion. They believed that Japanese people living on the West Coast had acted as spies or saboteurs to help the Japanese in the Pearl Harbor attack. The U.S. government labeled Japanese Americans as “enemy aliens” and barred them from military service based on these suspicions. Korematsu was also fired from his welding job because of his Japanese ancestry.

Within a few months of the Pearl Harbor attack, anti-Japanese sentiment among the general public and within Congress and the U.S. military convinced the Roosevelt administration to relocate all Japanese residents away from the West Coast. On March 2, 1942, the U.S. Army posted notices that all persons of Japanese ancestry, including those who were U.S. citizens, would be evacuated from the western halves of California, Oregon, and Washington, and the southern third of Arizona. One week later, Korematsu’s parents and three brothers reported to the Tanforan assembly center for evacuation. Korematsu did not go with them.

### Challenging the Evacuation Order

Korematsu believed that the mandatory relocation orders illegally discriminated against Japanese people, and he refused to cooperate. Although it

had become illegal for anyone of Japanese descent to remain in the excluded areas, Korematsu stayed in Oakland. In an attempt to disguise his Japanese appearance, he changed his name to Clyde Sarah and underwent cosmetic surgery to alter the shape of his eyes. He then presented himself as an American of Spanish and Hawaiian descent.

Despite these efforts, Korematsu was arrested in San Leandro, California, on May 30, 1942, and charged with violating the evacuation order. He was held in the San Francisco county jail, where he received a visit from an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The attorney asked Korematsu to allow the ACLU to bring his case to court as a legal challenge of the relocation and internment orders. The ACLU believed that these policies violated the constitutional rights of Japanese Americans.

Korematsu agreed to present his case in court with the help of the ACLU. The ACLU paid Korematsu's bail, and he was released from jail. Because of his Japanese ancestry, however, Korematsu was sent to the internment camp in Topaz, Utah, to await his trial.

### **An Unpopular Position**

At Topaz, Korematsu quickly learned that his legal challenge was enormously controversial within the wider Japanese-American community. Although most internees shared his belief that the internment policy was unjust, they also feared that protesting against it would only cause more trouble. Many Japanese Americans felt that peacefully complying with internment would help prove their loyalty to the United States. As a result, many internees viewed Korematsu as a troublemaker. They refused to associate with him in an effort to protect their own reputations.

On September 8, 1942, the federal district court for San Francisco, California, convicted Korematsu of the felony crime of violating military orders. Korematsu appealed this ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, which heard the case in October 1944. On December 18, 1944, in a landmark 6-3 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Korematsu. The justices upheld the constitutionality of the internment of Japanese Americans on the basis of military necessity.

As World War II drew to a close, Korematsu was allowed to leave Topaz for work in Salt Lake City, Utah. When the war ended and all restrictions on Japanese Americans were lifted, Korematsu moved to Detroit, Michigan, where his younger brother lived. He had trouble finding work because of his felony

conviction, though, so he returned to California in 1949. Korematsu eventually found a job in the Oakland area as an industrial draftsman.

### New Evidence Reopens the Case

In 1981 a political science professor, legal historian, and author named Peter Irons contacted Korematsu. While conducting unrelated research in the federal government archives, Irons had accidentally discovered a set of government documents from 1943 and 1944 that supported Korematsu's Supreme Court case. These documents had been withheld by government officials and never included in the evidence that was presented for consideration during Korematsu's 1944 trial. Since the Supreme Court had made its decision based on incomplete information, Korematsu had a sound basis to petition for a retrial of his case.

Korematsu agreed to allow Irons to file a formal request asking the U.S. Circuit Court in San Francisco, California, to overturn Korematsu's felony conviction. Korematsu's case was important because U.S. court rulings are generally based on precedents, which are rulings on previous cases that are related to the case under consideration. As long as Korematsu's conviction remained part of U.S. federal case law, the possibility existed for any American citizen to be detained indefinitely without a trial. The court agreed to reopen Korematsu's case.

On November 10, 1983, the U.S. District Court of Northern California in San Francisco overturned Korematsu's conviction on the basis of governmental misconduct. The court found that the U.S. government had intentionally suppressed evidence in their legal briefs in order to strengthen their case against Korematsu. Korematsu celebrated the ruling, which finally cleared his name after nearly forty years and also represented an important victory for civil rights activists. The U.S. Supreme Court's 1944 decision in *Korematsu v. United States* will continue to stand, however, until the Court hears a new case involving the military necessity of the mass internment of a single ethnic group.

### Korematsu's Legacy

After his conviction was overturned, Korematsu remained involved in civil rights activism. He worked for the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which granted all former internees an official apology and a \$20,000 restitution payment from the U.S. government. Korematsu also worked with attorneys, legal associations, and civil rights organizations to advocate for the rights of other ethnic groups in the United States. For example, after the terrorist

attacks of September 11, 2001, Korematsu filed briefs with the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of Muslim prisoners who were jailed in the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Korematsu's brief cited similarities between the Japanese internment during World War II and the indefinite detention of Muslims after 9/11.

In his later years, Korematsu received several awards for his work in civil rights. In 1998 President Bill Clinton awarded Korematsu the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. The ACLU honored Korematsu with the Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty Award in 2001, in recognition of his lifetime contributions to the advancement of civil liberties. The following year, Korematsu received the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund's Justice in Action Award. In 2004 the American Muslim Voice launched the Fred Korematsu Civil Rights Award to recognize those who have demonstrated courage and commitment to protecting civil liberties and constitutional rights.

Korematsu died in Oakland, California, on March 30, 2005, at the age of eighty-six. On February 12, 2012, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., included Korematsu in its permanent civil rights exhibit. Korematsu is the first Asian American to be included in this prestigious collection.

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## **Bitterness and Disillusionment at Poston**

*Tetsuzo Hirasaki was a twenty-one-year-old resident of San Diego, California, when he was interned at a camp in Poston, Arizona. Hirasaki's father was among those arrested immediately after the Pearl Harbor bombing; he was held in a separate camp away from his family. Throughout his internment, Hirasaki corresponded with Clara Breed, a librarian at the San Diego Public Library. Breed kept in touch with many internees, providing supplies, friendship, and moral support to Hirasaki and others. In the following letter from Hirasaki to Breed, the young man discusses the anger and bitterness that coursed through many of the camps, especially among younger Japanese Americans. He makes reference to rioting that erupted in several of the internment camps during the war. Hirasaki also mentions the Chinese Air Force. During World War II, a number of Chinese pilots received training from American instructors at Thunderbird Field, a U.S. Air Force Base near Glendale, Arizona.*

November 16, 1942

Dear Miss Breed,

Guess who? Yup it's ole unreliable again, none other than yours truly, Tetsuzo. Gosh the wind's been blowing all night and all morning. Kinda threatening to blow the roofs down. Dust is all over the place. Gives everything a coating of fine dust.

Heard from dad about a week ago. It seems that there is a possibility that many of the internees are to be released sometime close to Christmas (that's what the rumors have it). Almost everyone who has someone in an internment camp believes that his someone is the one coming home. At any rate the Alien Enemy Control at Washington is considering to allow the families to join the husbands in the internment camp. Many of us have written Edward J. Ennis, Director of the Alien Enemy Control unit asking that it be the other way around. Yet Fusa's dad is still interned.

I am still working in the mess hall. Brr to have to get up early in the morning. It is around 38 in the morning and at the middle part of the afternoon it is around 80+. The mornings don't warm up until just about noontime. My arm is all right. Not near so strong as at Santa Anita because I don't do any loading

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From DEAR MISS BREED: True Stories of the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II and a Librarian Who Made a Difference by Joanne Oppenheim. Copyright (c) 2006 by Joanne Oppenheim. Reprinted by permission of Scholastic, Inc.



or unloading of supplies. Have been doing a little carpentry as many of us here have no furniture other than cots. Haven't got much made here in my own apt. as most of my work is over where the menfolk have left for the sugar beet fields or where there just ain't no menfolk.

The food has been all right except for quantity. We still have trouble with the warehouse transportation system. Also transportation on the outside to bring food all the way from the Coast here to Poston is limited.

No I haven't hiked the river yet. I'd better do it soon cause there is going to be a fence around this camp!!!!!! 5 strands of barbed wire!!!!!! They say it's to keep the people out—ha ha ha what people the redskins? It's also to keep out cattle. Where in the cattle countries do they use 5 strands of barbed wire??

If they don't watch out there's going to be trouble. What do they think we are, fools? At Santa Anita at the time of the riot the armored cars parked outside of the main gates, pointed the heavy machine guns inside and then the army had the gall to tell us that the purpose of that was to keep the white folks from coming in to mob the Japs. Same thing with the guards on the watch towers. They had their machine guns pointed at us to protect us from the outsiders, hah, hah, hah, I'm laughing yet.

Enough of this before I go out and murder a white man by killing myself. hah, hah—Say what is this, just as I wrote that three bombers came roaring overhead flying so low that the barracks shook. Every now and then the Chinese Air Force who are training some where close to Poston, come zooming down at us here in camps. They must think it's funny.

Some day one of us is going to have a gun—A couple of weeks ago one of the bombers (twin motored Douglas attack bomber) crashed on the other side of the Colorado and burst into flame. It wasn't right but a lot of us were kinda glad, in a cynical sort of way. God forgive us for the thoughts that are beginning to run amok in our brains.

Last week a very good friend of mine got to thinking—and he went crazy. He tried to commit suicide by slashing his wrists. His roommates found him bleeding and immediately gave him first aid. He is still alive, but his face is like that of a wild ape caged for the first time in his life. Gosh I get the chills every time I remember how he looked that morning. I think he was sent to an insane asylum in Los Angeles.

Gee, what a morbid letter this turned out to be!

I am sending you a few things in appreciation for what you have done for me as well as for my sister and all the rest. The lapel pins are for you, your sister, and Miss McNary. If I remembered correctly Miss McNary's first name is Helen. If I am wrong you may do what you wish with the pin, but please tell me her name. Also what is your mother's name? There are three dogs made by Mrs. Umezawa from pipe cleaners. A longer ribbon may be used so that the dog may be pinned to the lapel or blouse. The corsages are for you and your mother. They were made by Mrs. Ohye (Mrs. Umezawa's daughter). The small roses were made by Mrs. Hirai and Mrs. Kushino and also Jane Kushino (Mrs. Kushino's 14 yr. old daughter). The chrysanthemum was made by Mrs. Nakamura a very good friend of mine. For that matter they are all good friends of mine. The 'mum was made from lemon wrappers and crepe paper. A word about Mrs. Nakamura. A former dressmaker with plenty of time on her hands. Took up knitting also learning English and now making flowers. So busy now she has almost no spare time. If it is possible could you send some simple child primers and a grammar book about 7th grade.

Your name plate I made from mesquite as are also the lapel pins. However the dark pin is made from a pine knot from Santa Anita. The rest are all Poston Products. The evacuation order came just as I was about to send it so it slipped my mind and I thought I had lost it. After all it was the only souvenir from Santa Anita.

Aren't we Japs clever? We are learning to make beautiful things out of ugly scrap, because we are having a hard time to get materials like pipe cleaners for dogs, crepe paper for flowers, also soft wire for flowers. We get ugly dead mesquite branches and twigs and turn them into a thing of beauty by attaching paper orange blossoms or cherry blossoms made from Kleenex.... I wish you had been able to attend our handicrafts fairs here in Poston.... Words just can't describe the beautiful carvings, paintings, knitting crochet work, dress making etc. If I only had a camera you would have at least a rough idea as to what had been made.

Very truly yours,  
Tetsuzo

p.s. Have a nice Thanksgiving dinner. TH

p.s. Do you think you could send me some Welch's peanut brittle? TH

### **Source**

Oppenheim, Joanne. *Dear Miss Breed: True Stories of the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II and a Librarian Who Made a Difference*. New York: Scholastic, 2006, p. 140-42.

# IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

## **Alien Land Laws**

Legislation enacted by 13 states to bar Japanese immigrants and other people who were ineligible for U.S. citizenship from owning or leasing land.

## **Allies**

Coalition of forces united against Japan, Italy, and Germany in World War II, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and many other countries in Europe and Africa.

## **Amache**

Internment camp located in Colorado.

## **Assembly Centers**

Initial gathering points within restricted areas where evacuees lived temporarily while awaiting movement to permanent internment camps.

## **Axis**

Coalition of forces united against the Allies in World War II, including Japan, Italy, and Germany.

## **Breed, Clara (1906-1994)**

Public librarian in San Diego, California, who maintained correspondence with hundreds of internees during and after World War II.

## **Citizenship Renunciation**

The act of rejecting citizenship in one's country of birth. More than 5,000 Japanese Americans interned at Tule Lake renounced their U.S. citizenship in protest of their imprisonment without evidence of wrongdoing.

## **Civil Liberties Act of 1988**

Legislation signed by President Ronald Reagan that offered an apology and \$20,000 reparation payment to each surviving former internee.

# CHRONOLOGY

**1885**

Japanese immigrants begin arriving in Hawaii to work on the sugarcane plantations. *See p. 10.*

**1891**

Japanese immigrants begin arriving on the West Coast of the United States to work on farms. *See p. 11.*

**1894**

On June 27, a U.S. District Court ruling clarifies that Japanese immigrants are not eligible for U.S. citizenship because they do not meet the “free white person” criteria stated in the Naturalization Act of 1790.

**1907**

The Immigration Act of 1907 becomes law, banning further immigration from Japan and also banning Japanese from entering the United States through Canada, Mexico, and Hawaii. *See p. 13.*

**1908**

The United States strikes a deal with Japan known as the “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” which includes exceptions to the Immigration Act of 1907 for Japanese who had previously visited the United States and the immediate family members of Japanese already in America. *See p. 13.*

**1913**

An alien land law is enacted in California, banning all resident immigrants who are ineligible for U.S. citizenship from owning or leasing land. (A second alien land law was passed in 1920.) Alien land laws are also eventually enacted in twelve other states. *See p. 15.*

**1924**

The Immigration Act of 1924 becomes law, effectively stopping all Japanese immigration to the United States. *See p. 17.*

**1931**

Japan invades China, straining diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States. *See p. 21.*

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