

Certain Inalienable Rights

by Rebecca Bigelow

Fifty years after the United States entered World War II, many images from the war years can be vividly brought to mind simply by mentioning key words. *Pearl Harbor*, *D-day*, and *Hiroshima* all instantly recapture the patriotism, fear, and hardship associated with the war. The words *concentration camp* also evoke instantaneous images. Most people think immediately of the suffering and loss of life at the Nazi death camps. Only a few people, however, will recall the 110,000 Japanese Americans who were evicted from the West Coast of the United States in the name of national security. These Japanese Americans were rounded up and forced to live behind barbed wire in U.S. concentration camps.

The internment of Japanese Americans occurred during a time of fear and racism. Many white citizens applauded the evacuation of the Japanese. Only the Quakers, and a few other, usually pacifist, religious groups protested at all. Even the majority of Japanese Americans did not protest their treatment, but put their trust blindly in the system that advocates freedom and justice for all. It was this system and the promise of a better life that brought them to this country in the first place.

Japanese people began immigrating to the United States in 1890. The vast majority of those first arrivals were single, male, agricultural workers, and they settled mainly on the West Coast. From 1890, until an immigration ban barring the Japanese from entering the United States was passed in 1924, fewer than 300,000 Japanese immigrated to the United States.

White people living on the West Coast expressed concern at this "flood" of Asian immigration. There were isolated racial incidents and anti-Japanese tirades in the newspapers. In response to this concern, a gentlemen's agreement between the United States and Japan was passed in 1907, in which Japan agreed to stop issuing passports to laborers for the continental United States.

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Laws were passed to prevent the Japanese immigrants (*Issei*) from becoming citizens or owning land in California, but there was no way to constitutionally keep their U.S.-born children (*Nisei*) from their rightful citizenship, or from owning land. In 1919 the Oriental Exclusion League was formed and created an anti-Japanese program that, among other things, wanted to deny citizenship to the *Nisei*.

Meanwhile, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) did its best to stem this legislative tide. The FCNL joined with Japanese American groups such as the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) in lobbying state and federal governments. They fought, albeit unsuccessfully, for the rights of *Issei* to be naturalized as U.S. citizens and to make the immigration laws more equitable.

After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were subjected to random searches for contraband. They were no longer allowed to own short-wave radios, cameras, or anything else that might aid them in "spying." These searches fueled white fears that a fifth column was operating on the West Coast. The area papers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, printed inflammatory tracts questioning Japanese loyalty. Then on February 19, 1942, Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. This one signature was the key to legislative action against Japanese Americans. On March 2, 1942, General John Dewitt issued the first military proclamation, declaring western California, Oregon, and Washington a military zone. On March 24, proclamation number three was issued, making it illegal for Japanese Americans to travel more than five miles from their homes without a pass. It also created a nighttime curfew banning them from being out between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. By the beginning of April, exclusion orders were posted on telephone poles ordering *Issei* and *Nisei* alike to report to assembly points on a specified date. The journey had begun.

Although these orders were issued in the name of national security, the racism behind them has become increasingly apparent. Many more Japanese immi-

grants lived in Hawaii than in the new military zone, yet these *Issei* and their *Nisei* children were not subjected to relocation. Further, the proximity of Hawaii to Japan made possible fifth-column operation much more likely there than on the West Coast. Finally, although the United States sheltered many German and Italian immigrants, there was no suggestion that these "enemy aliens" be relocated away from military zones or sent to camps to wait out the war. The obvious injustice of Japanese American relocation bothered only a few, among them the Quakers.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was one of the few groups to protest relocation, especially for the *Nisei*, who were U.S. citizens. They held letter writing campaigns and lobbied the government. When these efforts failed, the AFSC and the JACL worked together to help the evacuees

EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the military commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate military commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate military commander may impose in his discretion. . . .

Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House, February 19, 1942

sell, store, or give away their belongings, transport the goods they were taking with them, and find temporary lodging when necessary. When permanent relocation centers had been established, the AFSC got permission to drive invalids to the camps so they would not be separated from their families. They inspected several of the camps and reported on their findings to the Japanese Americans in temporary centers to alleviate the fear of the unknown. The AFSC also coor-

minated the drive to send gifts and supplies to the evacuees.

Upon arrival at the permanent relocation centers, the Japanese Americans struggled to adjust to the harsh conditions. There were ten relocation centers: Tule Lake and Manzanar in California; Poston and Gila River in Arizona; Topaz in Utah; Minidoka in Idaho; Heart Mountain in Wyoming; Granada in Colorado; and Rohwer and Jerome in Arkansas. Each

one of these camps was hastily built on land no one else wanted.

The people lived in barracks, and each family was allotted one room, about 20' x 10'. The walls were very thin, offering little privacy from neighboring families. There were lines for everything: to eat, get water, see a doctor, even to use the bathroom. The hospital was simply another barracks with no true sanitary conditions. There were outbreaks of dysentery and other diseases. The quality

Baggage inspection, Turlock, Calif., May 1942



of life at these camps was generally poor, particularly when compared to the style of living previously enjoyed by the Japanese Americans.

After their arrival in the camps, most Japanese Americans tried to maintain a sense of normalcy. They built furniture from scrap wood to try to make their rooms as homey as possible. They maintained as many former activities as possible, including schooling (for both children and adults), sports, newspapers, the JACL, and community dances.

There were strikes and protests at each camp, but serious violence was generally avoided. At Heart Mountain, for example, half the adult population signed a petition protesting the erection of a

children answered no to vote with their family. Other Nisei thought that to answer yes to question 28 and forswear allegiance to Japan meant there had once been an allegiance. They thought it was a trick question. Still more answered no merely as a form of protest. For whatever reasons, 6,700 Issei and Nisei interned in the camps answered no to question 28. Some 2,000 more gave a qualified yes. These people were branded disloyal, rounded up, and sent to Tule Lake. This camp was made the high security camp for "high risk" Japanese. Tule Lake was strictly guarded by the military and had some of the more violent protests throughout the remainder of relocation.

The majority of Japanese Americans quietly continued with their lives and hoped to leave the camps as soon as possible. Some were able to leave for jobs outside the camps. Others were allowed to join family outside the military zone. Some Nisei joined the all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Finally, some Nisei were able to go to college.

On December 17, 1944, the laws restricting loyal Japanese Americans from living on the West Coast were finally repealed, effective January 2, 1945. Tule Lake was the last camp to close its doors, closing on March 20, 1946. The Japanese Americans leaving the camps felt apprehension. The camps were the only homes they had known for two or more years. Many had no home to return to and no family established elsewhere to help them. It was a frightening proposition.

The same trains that once brought Japanese Americans to the camps, now returned them wherever they wanted to go. Those returning often faced the same prejudice they had left. It was a vicious circle. Many whites felt there must have been some truth to the rumors that Japanese Americans were disloyal or they would not have been relocated. Many were angry that the Japanese were allowed to return to the West Coast at all. There were isolated incidents of violence: people shooting into Japanese homes or trying to burn them down.

Again, the Quakers were instrumental in helping the returning Japanese Americans. If they had no home to return to, Friends helped find housing. If their homes had been left unattended, Quakers helped clean up or make repairs. Friends also helped replant gar-

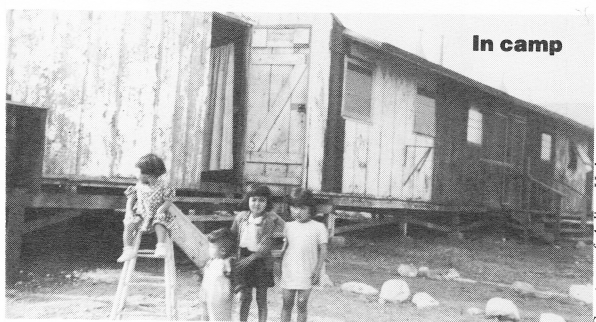
dens, purchase supplies, or reestablish community ties. The AFSC was particularly helpful in locating jobs for those needing them. Generally, the Quakers tried to make the transition back to normal life as easy as possible.

Many Japanese Americans chose not to return to the West Coast. They had nothing to go back to, because they had been forced to give up their homes with the evacuation order. The buyer's market, created by the haste in which Japanese Americans had to leave their homes, had meant selling their belongings at a huge loss. The U.S. government offered storage facilities, but they were entirely at the owner's risk and offered no insurance. Some of those who owned land and houses tried boarding up their homes. This too was a risk, because no insurance company would cover them for losses. Sometimes this was a successful venture, but others lost everything to fire, vandals, or the elements. Those who fared the best were those with trusted friends who acted as caretakers while families were interned.

There were business losses too. Many Japanese Americans owned small businesses and farms, which had to be disposed of quickly. Other Japanese had to give up high-paying jobs when they were evacuated. The salaries they were able to earn in the camps did not come close to the earning potential of some of the Japanese before evacuation.

According to Roger Daniels, in his book *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, the estimated figure for income loss is \$136 million in 1945 dollars. The estimated figure for property loss is between \$67 million and \$116 million, making total Japanese American financial losses somewhere between \$203 million and \$251 million in 1945 dollars. Translated into today's money, allowing only for inflation, the Japanese Americans experienced over one billion dollars' worth of loss from property and income.

Recently, Congress voted a settlement of \$20,000 for each surviving internee. This sum cannot begin to repair the financial, psychological, and personal damage done by relocation. This settlement closed the book on the redress movement as far as the United States government is concerned. It should not, however, close the book on the suffering of the Japanese Americans during World War II. This is a period of history whose lessons should not be forgotten. □



Courtesy of Arline Holson

barbed-wire fence around the camp. The citizens at Topaz went on strike after being served liver everyday for several weeks.

The issue that stirred up the most controversy inside the camps, was two questions on the so-called "loyalty questionnaire." Question 27 asked if the person would serve in the U.S. armed forces. Question 28 asked if the person would swear allegiance to the United States and forswear any allegiance to any other government, including Japan. Those answering yes to these questions were considered loyal. Those answering no were considered a threat to the United States.

Unfortunately, the questions were not clear-cut. They caused much confusion and were eventually rewritten, but the damage was done. Many Nisei had been willing to serve in the military before internment, but had been turned down. Now they felt no desire to fight for a government that denied their civil rights as citizens. As for question 28, Issei felt answering yes would leave them stateless. They were not, nor could they be, citizens of the United States. If they forswore allegiance to Japan, they would have no country. Many Issei for this reason answered no. Many Nisei