



My Life in a Concentration Camp, Manzanar

Joyce Okazaki, a GLA board member, was the June program speaker. Below is the text of her presentation.

At left is Manzanar photo of Joyce (Nakamura) Okazaki on the book jacket of the reprinted edition of "Born Free and Equal" by Ansel Adams, copyright 2001.

MY LIFE IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP, MANZANAR Joyce Nakamura Okazaki

Good afternoon to everyone on Zoom. Thank you, Louise, for inviting me to speak. Louise reminded me that I had given a talk for this program many years ago, I am a member of the Greater Los Angeles Chapter. I have revised my presentation over the years. Can't do the Power Point on Zoom, so here goes!

On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Why would Japan bomb the United States? I am an American of Japanese ancestry, so I wanted to know why Japan would do such a thing. I did some reading and found that Japan was not a model country. In the 1930's they invaded Korea and Manchuria, they fought battles and treated their captives cruelly. To try to put a stop to these invasions, the United States, Great Britain, and the Dutch East Indies organized an embargo on oil exports to Japan in July 1941, cutting off greatly needed oil supply. United States had broken Japan's top-secret code, and were aware of a potential attack. Japan needed the oil to make ships, tanks, and ammunition. So, they held a surprised attack on Pearl Harbor. My grandfather was arrested the night of December 7, as he was on a list that the FBI made of potential suspects for espionage, even though the Federal Government had sent Special Investigator, Curtis Munson, to conduct research into the patriotism of the Japanese Americans on the West Coast and Hawaii and found them to be patriotic and loyal to America. This was not shared with the FBI. They were waiting on my grandfather's doorstep as he went home from a family gathering celebrating his 60th birthday in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. I know that my parents were called by telephone to let them know that grandfather was taken to Federal prison in San Pedro. Six months later, he was released, and joined us in Manzanar, because there was nothing to hold him. He wasn't a teacher of Martial Arts or the Japanese language, a Buddhist minister or a leader of a Pro-Japanese Nationalistic Group. He was a good patriotic man and a highly successful businessman. Approximately 2000 or more Japanese men were picked up and put in jail from this list.

There was much prejudice against Asians on the West coast. This was building up ever since the immigration of the Chinese in 1849, who were later barred from entering the US by the Exclusion Act, 1882. Then, because the United States wanted workers for menial labor, like picking crops, US government negotiated with Japan to allow Japanese to come to the US

starting in 1884. The Japanese were targets of discrimination when they arrived in California. With the attack by Japan, on Pearl Harbor, influential groups, such as the Native Sons, and the Native Daughters of the Golden West, sent lobbyists to Washington DC to get the President to do something about these potential saboteurs and spies, the Japanese American community. When President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, they finally achieved their goal of 50 years, to remove all Japanese from the West Coast.

The Executive Order did not specify Japanese, but stated that a Military zone be laid out to restrict non-military personnel, and placed the carrying out of the directives to the Military Commander of the West Coast, Lt. General John L. DeWitt. Congress passed a law that stated if the Japanese did not obey the Military orders issued, they would be arrested immediately and put into prison. Lt. Gen. Dewitt hated the Japanese and issued over 100 Military Orders, one being a curfew that all Japanese must be in their homes by 8 pm. Another was that we should blacken all windows so we could not send signals to Japanese airplanes. Another was that all Japanese living on the West Coast must move inland 500 miles. Many packed their cars and drove to California borders but the states had guards and turned back the Japanese who did not have homes to go to, a job, or a sponsor. Lt. Gen. Dewitt had to change his orders that everyone needs to stay in place and register with the Central Command. They would then be told when they had to leave, but they definitely had to leave. This bulletin (show bulletin) was placed on bulletin boards and telephone poles in the community. It stated that we should bring all linens, sheets and towels for every member of the family, toiletries, and clothing, eating utensils. Its dated May 5, 1942 and everyone had to leave in 10 days. It also stated what you could not take with you. Unknown to many was the statement that the US Government would store big items, like pianos, appliances, furniture, and crated items. I remember that we had a new Bendix Washer and Dryer that was front loading. It was unique in that we could watch the clothes go round and round. When we left Manzanar and moved to Chicago, my mother had requested that the government send the stored items. All of these items that we had in Los Angeles, where we lived, showed up at our Chicago apartment, Bendix washer and dryer, furniture, refrigerator, RCA radio/phonograph with automatic record changer, pots and pans and dishes. Even an old wrought Iron double bed.

My family story was different. I have an aunt who is a doctor, she is still alive and will be 108 at end of this month (June) married to a doctor, Dr. James Goto. The Health Dept. requested that they start a hospital in Manzanar. My aunt agreed to do this provided that all his and her family and relatives could go to Manzanar at the same time. We all went on April 1 and 2. All the relatives lived in several barracks in Block 12. And here is where my story starts.

Do you remember what your life was like when you were 7 years old? This was my story, starting at age 7. We had lived a comfortable life at 2958 East 2nd St., Los Angeles, up the hill from Evergreen Baptist Church. I had a big playroom full of toys I shared with my younger sister. My family, father, mother, sister and I, left our rented home and arrived in Manzanar on April 2, 1942. We traveled by train from Los Angeles, boarding the train, not at Union Station, but at a railroad siding somewhere in the area close to the Station. There were soldiers with rifles standing guard over all of us until we boarded the train. There were Army guards on the train, too. After a long ride with all the windows covered so we couldn't be seen by any people, we were transferred to an Army transport truck, the kind with benches on each side to ride the rest of the way to Manzanar. It was nighttime, it was dark as there were no lights. We were greeted by an uncle who had a flashlight and led the way to our living quarters, Block 12, barrack 9, unit 4, 12-9-4. We walked a long way from the front of the camp to the back section, avoiding all sort of ditches. Because there was a shortage of living units, we moved in with my grandmother and 2 aunts. They lived with us until more barracks were built, and then they moved, but we stayed. All four of us lived in one room, 20 by 25 ft., with four cots, mattresses filled with straw, one light bulb hanging from ceiling, one stove to heat the room, no running water or bathroom, no kitchen

to cook food, no chairs or table. The next day we had to get our typhoid shots, so we lined up for that, but I decided to make a run. I didn't get very far as I was caught. Also, we walked to the Mess Hall to eat and went to the Women's latrine to brush teeth, wash hands, use toilet and shower. We had to line up for food at the Mess Hall 3 times a day, walk to the bathrooms, men's and women's lavatories, where there were no doors or walls between stalls, both toilets and showers, no privacy.

Mother warned us not to go near the barbed wire fence or we could get shot. And we were also told to watch for snakes or scorpions, because if they bit you, you could die. I knew what a snake looked like, but what did a scorpion look like? Later in the school year we learned to draw a scorpion so we would know what they looked like, rattlesnakes, too. School didn't start until the fall of 1942. I left second grade sometime around the beginning of March. I went to Maryknoll Missionary School with all Japanese classmates. When EO 9066 and Lt. Gen. DeWitt's orders were issued, the school was closed because we were all supposed to move away. In Manzanar, school started in the fall, I went into 3rd grade. Told my mother I was not going back to 2nd grade.

Later, as life became more settled, people built chairs and tables from scrap lumber, planted gardens, raised vegetables, put up curtains on windows, went to school, church or temple, got married, had babies, whatever one does to carry on with life. But whatever people did, they had to walk there, to work, to school, to visit relatives, friends, to go to the hospital or the doctor. They also went to work and had jobs in the co-operatives, stores, that were formed, in the professions, in administration to keep the camp operating. agriculture, growing food, and the mess halls. Pay was minimal and it had to be less than what a US soldier was paid, \$21. So, the pay was \$19 per month for professionals, college graduates, which included doctors, dentists, teachers, \$16 for skilled work, as nurses or secretaries, \$12 for semi-skilled, and \$8 for unskilled.

Students in college, who had their education interrupted, were allowed to leave if they could find a college east of the excluded area, that would accept them starting in fall 1942. These students were assisted by the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers), who found colleges that would accept Japanese, helped them with obtaining transcripts, filing their applications, finding housing, provided scholarships when needed, and made sure the communities they were going to, would welcome them. Others were given work furloughs if they volunteered to harvest crops. Individuals and families began to leave the camps in late 1943, provided they went east and did not return to the West Coast. They were required to complete a questionnaire, titled Request for Permission to Leave, but was in reality a loyalty questionnaire with the objectionable # 27 and 28 questions. #27 asked if they would serve in the U.S military and 28 asked if an individual would foreswear allegiance to the Emperor of Japan. This questionnaire was also given to all adults. If anyone answered NO to any or both of these questions, or left them blank, they were immediately moved to Tule Lake Segregation Center, a far more rigid Prison Camp, under Military Control.

In the fall of 1943, a fortunate event happened to our family. Ansel Adams came to Manzanar to photograph families living and surviving. He was too old to serve in the military, so he asked his friend, Ralph Merritt, director of Manzanar, if there was something he could do. He was invited to photograph people living their everyday lives. Our family was selected as a family doing various things. He took our portraits and various other photos with my mother, sister, and me in different poses. My father was on a work furlough to pick potatoes in Pocatello, Idaho. Adams wrote the entire text, took all the photographs, and published the book, titled "Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans" in 1944, while the war was still raging in Asia. The book was not well received and it was never disclosed what happened to all the books, which were soft cover and like a magazine. It sold for \$1.00 each. It was on the newsstands one day, and quickly disappeared from view. Later on, in 1981, copies were sold at

the National Archive in Washington DC for \$250, and considered a rare book. Our portraits were in the book. When the book was reprinted in 2002, in preparation for the opening of the Manzanar National Historic Site in 2004, as part of the National Parks Service, the book had a hard cover, colorful book jacket, and quality paper for the photographs. My photograph was selected to be on the cover. (show book cover) I also wrote a short essay on the absence of my father's photograph for the back fly leaf. Because Ansel Adams was a well-known photographer, the photographs he took in Manzanar, were in gallery showings and exhibits at various museums in California, including UCLA and JANM. Adams wrote in this book about the future. He was very sympathetic to the Japanese Americans and felt they should not be isolated in segregated places. He wrote that the prevailing thoughts of most Caucasians date back to the Jim Crow era and that their thinking would color their acceptance of our community into the general population. Fears of people of a different race would cause hatred, racial discrimination. It is worth reading Adams thoughts in this book, as he himself thought this was his best sociological photography work. One of his quotes from the book, "We must be certain that as the rights of the individual are the most sacred elements of our society, we will not allow passion, vengeance, hatred, and racial antagonism to cloud the principles of universal justice and mercy." Because he felt that this work was of historical significance, he donated all of the Manzanar photographs to the Library of Congress.

My parents worked in Manzanar. My mother graduated from University of Southern California (USC) with a Physical Education major, so she was hired to teach PE and Health to boys and girls, grades 7 through 12 from Sept 1942 until we left camp, July, 1944. My father graduated from University of California, Berkeley, School of Architecture, so he worked as a draftsman and surveyor for the Dept. of Public Works. In early 1944 he applied for permission to leave and was granted a one-way ticket to wherever he wanted to go plus \$25. He went to New York City, and found a job that moved him to Chicago. After school semester ended, we left to join him in Chicago by Union Pacific train from Reno, Nevada. We lived in freedom in Chicago, Illinois for 8 years before we finally returned to Los Angeles. By this time, I was attending University of Illinois, at Navy Pier, Chicago. I transferred to UCLA in the fall of 1952 and graduated from UCLA with a major in Business Administration, January 1956, because I didn't want to attend summer school.

World War 2 ended, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the surrender of Japan, August 14, 1945. Manzanar closed on November 21, 1945. The delay was because the remaining people had no home to return to, no job, and no money. A very sad situation. From Manzanar they were moved to trailer camps in the Los Angeles area, set up by US Government, in open spaces in the Valley. Living conditions were terrible and unsanitary, worse than living in camp.

In 1980, Congress formed the Commission on Wartime Internment and Relocation of Citizens, CWIRC, and held hearings in 1981 in various cities around the US. Many Japanese Americans testified at these hearings, which resulted in the determination that the incarceration of Japanese Americans were the result of War Hysteria, Racial Discrimination and Poor Administrative Leadership. This also laid the foundation for the movement to begin legislation for redress and reparations. Thank you for listening to my talk. I will take questions or comments.
June 12, 2022

(For additional information on Joyce Nakamura Okazaki, there is an entry on her in Wikipedia.)