

1. THE POWER OF HISTORY

At 7:48 a.m. on December 7, 1941, Japanese military forces launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor causing mass casualties and driving the United States into World War II. Though I was not yet born, this dark moment in history was to impact the rest of my life.

Three months later, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Presidential Executive Order 9066. This led to over 100,000 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry being forcibly incarcerated in concentration camps across the country and another 20,000 being displaced.

My family were among those people who had their lives upended. They were only able to take what they could physically carry during the evacuation, leaving behind their homes, friends, pets and every other part of the life they had known. Their possessions, they were told, would be moved to warehouses and given back to them when they returned. Of course, this never happened, except for a few cases where family friends took it upon themselves to hold belongings personally.

My mother remembers being taken to the train station, where she was put on a cattle car, since there were not enough passenger cars for everyone. When she arrived at the camp in Poston, Arizona, she found the accommodations were not much better than facilities for livestock.

The wooden barracks she was assigned to were just four walls, with cracks you could see through, a raised floor, and a roof. These single, small rooms would sometimes house as many as two or three whole families. She recalls stuffing gunny sacks with hay to be used as her mattress, and the blankets she was supposed to use as bedding she hung up as makeshift walls for some privacy.

My grandmother was given a job outside the camp as a maid and my mother assigned to be a Taster, meaning she had to sample food if there was concern it had spoiled. She hated doing this and would always cry. In the end, no matter what she tried she would get sick.

My father talked about the constant hunger. He and his friends would sneak out at night and break into the commissary to steal food. They thought they were being clever, until one day the chef came up to them, telling them take only what they needed since others were going hungry, too. After that, they stopped.

For my grandfather, sheer boredom was a struggle. He was used to working, not sitting idle in a baking desert. He took up woodcarving – a hobby he kept up for the rest of his life. I remember seeing him many years later sitting outside, carving little figurines with his pocketknife he gave to me and his other grandchildren to play with.

He left me two carved horse bookends made from burlwood he created in the camp I proudly have on display in my living room. I still don't know how he was able to acquire a knife in camp, since they weren't permitted for internees. My father later took up carving too, and I also have his pride and joy, an eagle he crafted from a piece of redwood. They are reminders to me of injustice, but also the indomitable spirit.

Though the pain and struggles created by internment were never forgotten by those who had experienced it, many were unaware it had even taken place. When I was an 11-year-old

student sitting in 7th grade American History, my teacher asked if any of us knew someone interned in a concentration camp during World War II. I raised my hand.

When she asked where, I replied, "Poston, Arizona."

She gave me detention for lying, saying no such thing had ever happened – if it had, it would be in the history books, surely?

She was right about one thing. The internment of Japanese Americans was mentioned in hardly any histories of the time, and certainly not the ones read by students or the general populace.

When I was sitting in detention, the School Principal came in and said there had been a mistake and sent me home, without further explanation. Word of my 'misbehavior' had clearly been in discussion in the staff room, where someone must have known what I had spoken of was true.

Even I had my doubts after my experience at school. When home, I asked my father if the internments really happened, why wasn't it covered in my class? Why did no one seem to know anything about it? His answer was, "It wasn't important enough to be included."

In the following decades, as further details came to light, the internment has almost universally been condemned as the result of racial prejudice and war hysteria. It turned out the two government reports commissioned at the time on the potential threat Japanese Americans might pose to national security both determined they were harmless, and in fact argued against incarceration.

Japanese were not the only group to be relocated to internment camps, with approximately 11,000 people of German ancestry and 3,000 people of Italian ancestry targeted. However, this number is a fraction of the people of Japanese heritage taken, for the simple reason Europeans 'blended in' better. There were other inexplicable decisions. For example, Japanese internees almost entirely came from West Coast states. The Japanese Americans who formed nearly half of the Hawaiian population were largely left alone.

No Japanese national or Japanese American living in the United States was ever found guilty of any sabotage or espionage throughout the war. In 1988, President Reagan signed bill HR 442 granting restitution of \$20,000 to every living survivor after much work by the redress group chaired by my brother-in-law John Tateishi.

My father had died only a week prior to the signing, meaning my mother was the only one of my family eligible to receive compensation. When I told her the bill had passed, I was surprised to find she was far from pleased. She didn't want the money and feared the announcement would draw negative attention back to the Japanese community.

Eventually, she agreed to accept, on the principle she would otherwise be excusing the internment. However, she split the money between myself and my siblings rather than keep what she saw as tainted money for herself. Some wounds no amount of money can wash away.

There is now a permanent display on the internment camps at the Japanese American Museum in downtown Los Angeles, including an actual barrack. The museum buses in

thousands of the local students from the public schools annually to help educate them on this dark part of American history.

I have personally been invited to speak on the internment on a number of occasions, including three Rotary International Presidential Peace Conferences. I discuss the topic not in the spirit of resentment and condemnation, but to educate how fear and ignorance can bring out the worst of humanity, and in the hope, history will not repeat itself.

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