Understanding Japanese Internment

Before Pearl Harbor

The American reaction to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor was rooted in decades of anti-Asian immigration policies, racism, fear, and a failure of political leadership. Within three short months, the federal government uprooted all people of Japanese descent who lived in California, Oregon, Washington, and part of Arizona – 120,000 men, women, children, and elderly – moving them to prison camps in the interior West. Two-thirds of the “evacuees” were American citizens, children of the immigrant generation born in the U.S., who were detained in violation of their constitutional rights.

America’s anti-Asian policies date back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first legislative act to limit immigration based on ethnicity and nationality. Immigration policies began to target Japanese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. Euro-American laborers and labor unions on the West Coast formed the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) which campaigned to exclude Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and South Asian immigrants, and to segregate children of Asian descent from public schools. In 1907, the Japanese and American governments came to a compromise known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement. Japan agreed to end immigration to the U.S. on the condition that Japanese American children would be allowed to attend public schools.

Western states also implemented “alien land laws.” For example, California passed the Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 which prohibited Japanese immigrants from becoming American citizens, possessing long-term leases on real estate, and owning agricultural land. These laws were intended to prevent Japanese immigrants from achieving economic security. The federal government tightened immigration policies during World War I and the interwar years with the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924. The war provoked nativist ideologies among many whites, which inflamed existing racist and discriminatory attitudes toward Japanese immigrants. These acts restricted immigration for more groups of people, such as Italians and Greeks, completely barred immigration from the “Asiatic Zone,” and required literacy tests for entry into the country.

Pearl Harbor and Executive Order 9066

After Pearl Harbor, mainland and federal governments succumbed to fears that all people of Japanese ancestry might be loyal to the Japanese emperor, jeopardizing American security. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the removal of all people of Japanese heritage from the Pacific coastal states. The
government never charged or tried these Japanese Americans for any crimes, although four cases went to the Supreme Court.

The Order gave the military an enormous amount of power on the West Coast. Before Pearl Harbor, Lt. General John L. DeWitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command (WDC), had expressed concerns that the Japanese community on the West Coast was a threat. Investigations at the time found no evidence to support his claim. However, Pearl Harbor aroused support for DeWitt’s unsubstantiated belief in Japanese American disloyalty, and Executive Order 9066 gave the military authority to uproot Japanese communities from coastal areas.

The evacuation disproportionately affected Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. In contrast, one-third of Hawaii’s population was of Japanese descent, yet fewer than 3,000 adults were deemed a security risk and removed to camps on the mainland. The government did not have the space or resources to intern the majority of that Japanese community, and they were essential to Hawaii’s workforce. This contrasts with California, where the Japanese community made up a tiny fraction of the state’s 6.9 million residents.

Relocation and Internment

In April 1942, the Federal War Relocation Authority (WRA) gathered 8,000 Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay area and moved them to temporary housing at Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, California. Allowed to bring only what they could carry, families left behind their belongings and businesses, most of which they were forced to sell for pennies on the dollar. At Tanforan, many lived in converted horse stalls for six months until they were moved to Topaz, near Delta, Utah.

Topaz was one of ten Japanese “relocation centers” built and operated by the WRA. Topaz was the fifth largest city in Utah while it was in use, with an average population of 8,300 residents. From its opening on September 11, 1942, to its closing in 1945, Topaz housed more than 11,000 people of Japanese descent. Most of the internees at Topaz came from the Bay Area, until 225 Hawaiians arrived in March 1943. People could transfer from one camp to another to be with other family members, or they could move to eastern cities for work or college, but they could not return to California until January 1945.

Utah Governor Herbert B. Maw initially opposed the internment camp. He eventually allowed it because the camp could provide needed workers for Utah’s sugar beet farms. Overall, there were mixed reactions among Utahns. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were generally open-minded toward immigrants, however, that began to change as more Japanese Americans arrived in the state. Some internees experienced discrimination when they went to work on farms in northern Utah.

For Further Exploration

Topaz Museum
55 W Main Street, Delta, Utah, 84624
topazmuseum.org, (435) 864-2514 Please e-mail to schedule a field trip.

Utah State University Topaz Japanese American Relocation Center Digital Collection
http://digital.lib.usu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/Topaz


Densho: The Japanese American Legacy
https://densho.org/

Recommended Readings


OUR PAST, THEIR PRESENT
Japanese Internment at Topaz

Life at Topaz

When internees arrived at the camp, they went through a registration process that included medical examinations and loyalty pledges. They were then assigned rooms in hastily constructed barracks. Living conditions were difficult at Topaz due to the high altitude and arid climate that created hot, dusty summers and cold, snowy winters. The remote, isolated, high desert contrasted drastically with the green and temperate environments of the Bay Area, and especially Hawaii. The barracks made of pine boards covered with tar paper were ill equipped to provide adequate shelter from the elements. The apartments had no running water, they were heated only by coal stoves. The communal restrooms lacked privacy. Families ate their meals in mess halls three times a day. Even though Japanese were hired as cooks, the food was less than satisfactory. Yet in these conditions, most people made the best of the terrible situation.

Topaz internees worked to maintain family and community life while they were incarcerated. Children attended school in the camp -- two elementary schools were needed to educate all of the children -- and teens graduated from high school. Youth participated in Boy Scouts, athletics, dances, and traveling talent shows. Community celebrations included American and Japanese holidays and festivals. The camp had a hospital, newspaper, and churches, which provided jobs to those in the camp. Internees also worked in the mess halls and schools. People could apply to leave the camp for agricultural work throughout Utah and Idaho, or leave Topaz and relocate any place east of California.

Nonetheless, the internees were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by armed military personnel. On April 11, 1943, a guard shot and killed James Wakasa, 63, while he was walking his dog near the fence. Although investigators established that his body was several feet inside the fence, the guards claimed Wakasa was trying to escape and the shot was meant as a warning. The guard was found not guilty for Wakasa’s death. Although people living at Topaz could move in and out of the camp with the proper authorization, this incident illustrates the travails of Japanese internment.

In 1943, the federal government created a Japanese American combat unit to join U.S. forces fighting in Europe and the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. Young men and their families wrestled with the dilemmas of fighting on behalf of their country in spite of the internment. Many felt that military service would demonstrate the loyalty of the Japanese American community. Others feared that the military would exploit the soldiers.

The camp began to thin out as more and more internees moved into the interior of the U.S. After Topaz closed in October 1945, only half of its population returned to coastal cities in California. A small number of Topaz internees moved to northern Utah and filled labor shortages on farms and at Tooele Ordnance Depot, but the majority of Japanese Americans migrated to larger and more diverse cities or waited to return to California in January 1945. New Japanese American communities emerged in inland states such as Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, with Chicago as the largest resettlement city.

About “Our Daily Diary”

This collection contains excerpts from a diary kept by Anne Yamauchi’s third grade class from March to August 1943. The students attended school through the summer because classrooms were not finished when internees arrived in September 1942, and it was so cold that classes were cancelled in the winter. For the diary, the students discussed what they would write each day and took turns making drawings for each page. Their teacher did the handwriting. The diary illustrates many facets of daily and community life at Topaz.

You can access the complete diary online, courtesy the Utah Division of State History Library and Collections and the Topaz Museum in Delta, Utah.
OUR PAST, THEIR PRESENT
Japanese Internment at Topaz

Sources


America’s reaction to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor came from decades of anti-immigration laws, racism, and fear. Within three short months, the government made all people of Japanese descent who lived in California, Oregon, Washington, and part of Arizona move to camps away from the Pacific Coast. The majority were American citizens, which violated their constitutional rights.

Anti-Asian laws in the United States date back to 1880s when the government began to limit immigration based on people’s race and nationality, especially Chinese. In the early 1900s, these laws began to target Japanese, Korean, and South Asian immigrants whose children were segregated from public schools in San Francisco. In 1907, Japan agreed to end immigration to the U.S. and in return students in San Francisco could go to public school.

Laws that forbid Asian immigrants from becoming citizens and from owning property prevented assimilation or security. The government also made new laws between World War I and World War II to limit immigration for more groups of people, such as Italians and Greeks, and stopped immigration from Asian countries.

After Pearl Harbor, the government feared that people of Japanese ancestry might be more loyal to Japan and be a threat to national security. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. For one month, people were allowed to leave the Pacific Coast voluntarily. Ultimately 120,000 people of Japanese heritage were forced to move from their homes. The government never charged them with any crimes. People of Japanese ancestry living in Hawaii were not removed en masse as they were on the coast.

In April 1942, the government gathered all Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay area and moved them to temporary buildings at racetracks in California. Families could only bring only what they could carry and hastily leave their household items, farms, and businesses. Many lived in converted horse stalls for six months until they were moved to Topaz, near Delta, Utah. It was one of ten Japanese internment camps in the U.S. From 1942 to 1945, Topaz housed more than 11,000 people of Japanese descent.

When internees arrived to Topaz, they had to go through a registration process, take medical examinations, and fill out a loyalty questionnaire. They lived in small rooms in poorly built barracks. Living conditions were hard because of the high altitude and dry climate. Summers were hot and dusty, and winters were cold and snowy. The rooms were heated by coal stoves and did not have private bathrooms or kitchens. The shared restrooms did not have privacy. Families ate in mess halls three times a day. Some complained of the food and long lines.

People worked to maintain family and community life during their internment. Children went school in the camp and participated in Boy Scouts, athletics, and dances. They held celebrations that included both American and Japanese holidays and festivals. The camp had a hospital, newspaper, and churches. Everyone could work and were paid between $14.00 and $19.00 per month. People could apply to leave the camp to work on farms in Utah and Idaho. Others chose to apply for relocation to locations east of California and leave Topaz. When Topaz closed in October of 1945, only half of its people moved back to California.
Japanese-owned store with “SOLD” and “I AM AN AMERICAN” signs. Once relocation was ordered, Japanese Americans were forced to sell their businesses and leave their jobs regardless of their citizenship.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the owner posted “I AM AN AMERICAN”?
- How would losing the business affect the owner’s family?
Photo: “Japs Keep Out” sign, Barstow, California, 1942

https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483251

Discussion Question:

- What immigration policies restricted citizenship based on race and ethnicity?
Photo: *San Francisco Examiner* headlines, 1942


Newspaper headlines proclaim the “Ouster of all Japs from California is near.” Lower headline reads “Thousands of Allies Face Japs in Java.”

**Discussion Questions:**

- Does the newspaper appear to support or oppose the removal of Japanese Americans from California?
- How did the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor influence American racial attitudes toward Japanese people?
- Some people claimed that Japanese living in the United States “caused” Pearl Harbor. How would you refute that charge?
- How was internment in Hawaii different from mainland? Were Japanese Americans who already lived in Utah required to go to Topaz?
Photo: Preschool at Tanforan Racetrack, 1942

Horse stalls at Tanforan Race Track were roughly converted to temporary living quarters for relocated Japanese Americans. The smell was terrible.

The mattresses in Tanforan were filled with straw.
Topaz was 19,800 acres or 31 square miles. 5000 acres were for the pig farm, chicken farm, and cattle ranch. Another 5,000 acres was planted with vegetables and alfalfa. The camp itself was one square mile.
Photo: Boy Scouts Ceremony, 1943


Discussion Questions:

- Why were there Japanese American Boy Scouts?
- What role do you think the Boy Scouts played in the community at Topaz?
“Our Daily Diary” Title Page, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”
http://cdmbuntu.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ushs_oddtwr/id/77
“Our Daily Diary” Student Names

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”

Discussion Questions:

- Study the students’ names. What do you notice about them?
- Four students in the class are Caucasian whose parents were working as administrators at Topaz.
“Our Daily Diary” March 11, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”

Discussion Questions:

● Why were internees encouraged to buy war bonds and stamps?
● A block housed about 250 people.
● Why do you think it was big news for Lynn to get a new refrigerator?
“Our Daily Diary” March 15, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”

Discussion Questions:

- What is the weather usually like in central Utah in March?
- What were the barracks made of? How were they heated?
- Why would the Boy Scouts have to build fires for these newcomers?
- How does Miss Yamauchi welcome David Crowton? A few pages later David gets lost on his way to school. Why do you think that happened?
“Our Daily Diary” May 3, 1943.

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”

Discussion Questions:

- *Hana Matsuri* is an important Japanese holiday that celebrates springtime and the birth of Buddha. The word *hana* means flower, and *matsuri* means festival. Why do you think the Japanese American community celebrated this day in Topaz?
- Why would diseases spread quickly through the camp?
“Our Daily Dairy” May 21, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3rd Grade, “Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943.”

Discussion Questions:

- About 400 men enlisted or were drafted into the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Why would that be a difficult thing to do?
- If your family had been interned by the government, would you want to fight for that country? Why or why not?
The pig farm was located about four miles from the living area. Little boys liked to go there to swim in the farm ditches. Boy Scouts went to the mountains to camp and earn merit badges.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the camp celebrated American holidays like the Fourth of July?
- Why would fires be so dangerous in Topaz?
In September 1942, we were shipped by train to a concentration camp which we knew to be somewhere in Utah and was called Topaz. There were no trees, or growth of any kind, except clumps of dry greasewood. We were entering the Sevier Desert some fifteen miles west of Delta, and the surroundings were now as bleak as a bleached bone. As the bus drew up to one of the barracks, we heard the unlikely sound of band music. Marching toward us down the dusty road was a group of young Boy Scouts who had come with the advance contingent, playing bugles, trumpets, and drums and carrying signs that read, "Welcome to Topaz—Your Camp." It was a touching sight to see them standing in the burning sun, covered with dust and making such a determined effort to lessen the shock of our arrival at this bleak desert camp.

We found that our barracks room contained nothing but four army cots without mattresses. . . Those who arrived still later did not even have barracks to go to and were simply assigned to cots set up in empty mess halls, laundries, or the corridors of the hospital. As the mornings and nights grew colder, we looked with increased longing at the black iron stove that stood uselessly outside our barracks waiting for work crews to bring it inside and connect it. One day, almost a month after our arrival, a work crew composed of resident men appeared and finally installed our stove. . .

By now my father, sensing the tremendous needs of the struggling community, had volunteered to serve on several committees. My mother, in her own gentle and quiet way, continued to be a loving focal point for our family, converting our dreary barracks room into a makeshift home, where we invited our friends as we did back in Berkeley. Having been a close family, ours did not disintegrate, as many did, from the pressures created when entire families were confined to living in a single room.

I applied to work in the Topaz elementary school system and earned a salary of $19 a month for the forty-hour week. [One day] about noon, gray-brown clouds began massing in the sky, and a hot sultry wind seemed an ominous portent of coming storm. Before I was halfway to school, the wind grew so intense I felt as though I were caught in a hurricane of dust. Barracks only a few feet away were soon completely obscured by walls of dust, and I was fearful that the wind might sweep me off my feet. I stopped every few yards to lean against a barracks and catch my breath and then plodded on to school. When I got there, I found that many of the children had braved the storm to come to school. It touched me deeply to see the eagerness of the children to learn despite the desolation of their surroundings and the meager tools for learning. At the time they seemed to adapt with equanimity and cheerfulness to this total and bewildering upheaval of their young lives.

I tried to conduct class, but dust poured into the room from all sides as well as from the hole in the roof, which still lacked a chimney. It soon became obvious that we could not continue classes, and it seemed prudent to send the children home before the storm grew worse and stranded us all at school. That night the wind reached such terrible force I was sure our barracks would be blown apart. For hours, the wind shrieked around us like a howling animal, rattling and shaking our flimsy barracks. The following day, the non-Japanese head of elementary schools reprimanded the teachers of Block 41 for having dismissed school without consulting him.

A succession of dust storms, rainsqualls, and a full-fledged snowstorm finally brought our limping schools to a complete halt in mid-November. Snow blew in from the holes that still remained in our roof, and we all shivered in ten-degree temperatures even though we wore coats, scarves, and boots. An official notice finally appeared stating that schools would close and not reopen until they were fully winterized with sheetrock walls and stoves. It seemed close to miraculous that we had been able to hold any kind of school for as long as we had, and I knew it was possible only because the children had been so eager to come and the residents so anxious to have some semblance of order in their lives.
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Map: Internment Camp, 2017
Source: National Park Service, National Archives

https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/internment-intro
Loyalty Questionnaire, p. 1

“Loyalty Questionnaire,” Densho Encyclopedia, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty_questionnaire/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty_questionnaire/)
Loyalty Questionnaire, p.2
Loyalty Questionnaire, p.3
Loyalty Questionnaire, p. 4

Questions 27 and 28 were very controversial. Even though Question 27 was changed to accommodate women, it was still difficult to answer. The WRA decided those two questions would determine if someone was loyal to the United States. If they answered “no” to the two questions, they were sent to Tule Lake, a segregated center, or possibly sent to Japan.
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Japanese Internment at Topaz

Poster: “Instructions to All Person of Japanese Ancestry”, April 1942

Discussion Question

● What do “alien” and “non-alien” mean?