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The Journey for Justice of the Japanese Americans

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Research Seminar

Dr. Hicks

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The Japanese American citizens were dehumanized by the actions of the United States government during World War II; they were forced into internment camps strictly because they were of Japanese descent. Through the accounts of the men, women, and children who experienced the internment camps and lived on to tell about them, they were treated less than human. They were definitely not protected by the laws of the United States of America. There are many different elements that appear to have created the opportunities for certain men to imprison citizens of the United States without a trial or jury. Through the trials of the people who lived and experienced the different elements of the Japanese American internment; a case against the men who made the internment possible and the lack of legal representation, which led to a 46 year fight with the government that put them in the camps before the government admitted their wrong doings and attempting to reimburse the people for their losses.

The goal of this writing is to follow the lives of the Japanese Americans who had to experience being forced into the internment camps during World War II until those people received the payments from President Reagan. As well as to point out blatant lapses in the United States government system. Through all of the articles, books, and newspapers, there was not anything that covered all 47 years of the Japanese American's journey to finding justice. All of the articles focus on a part of the journey, but never the entire journey. The readings would focus on the education system, the women of the camps, the physical layout of the camps, or the overlaps in the government that made everything possible. I wanted to add a piece of writing that helped put their journey all together.

The obvious beginning to all of the problems for the Japanese Americans was the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup> of 1941 at 7:48 a.m. Hawaiian Time by the Empire of Japan. Shortly after this attack, a man named General John Lesesne DeWitt, who was in charge of the

Headquarters of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army in Presidio, California, started being very vocal about the Japanese Americans. General Dewitt began voicing his opinion to anyone who would listen. He discussed this with the Attorney General less than a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The General referred to the Japanese Americans that were from the western side of the United States as “enemy aliens”.<sup>1</sup> He stated, “The threat is a constant one, and it is getting to be more dangerous all the time. I have little confidence that the enemy aliens are law-abiding or loyal in any sense of the word. Some of them, yes; many, no. Particularly the Japanese.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the entire conversation with the Attorney General, General Dewitt expressed an attitude that can be described as nothing less than complete hatred for the entire Japanese American race. He is completely forward with stripping the American citizens of their constitutional rights. Some of these Japanese Americans were born before 1924 in America; they were called the Issei generation. Then there was the Nisei generation which by definition is the children who are born to Japanese people in a new country. So by the time the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, many to most of the Japanese American population in the United States was the second or third generation and had no affiliation with their homeland of the Japanese Empire. General Dewitt, being a vocal man stated, “In order to meet that threat, we have got to do two things. We have got to be able to enter their homes and premises, search and seize immediately without waiting for normal process of the law – obtaining a search warrant to make an arrest.”<sup>1</sup> These sorts of comments showed General Dewitt’s blatant lack of respect for the Japanese race and for the laws of the nation that he was so highly regarded. General Dewitt took his ideas and his complaints all the way to the White House, where he discussed the threat of the “enemy aliens” in the United States with President Roosevelt.

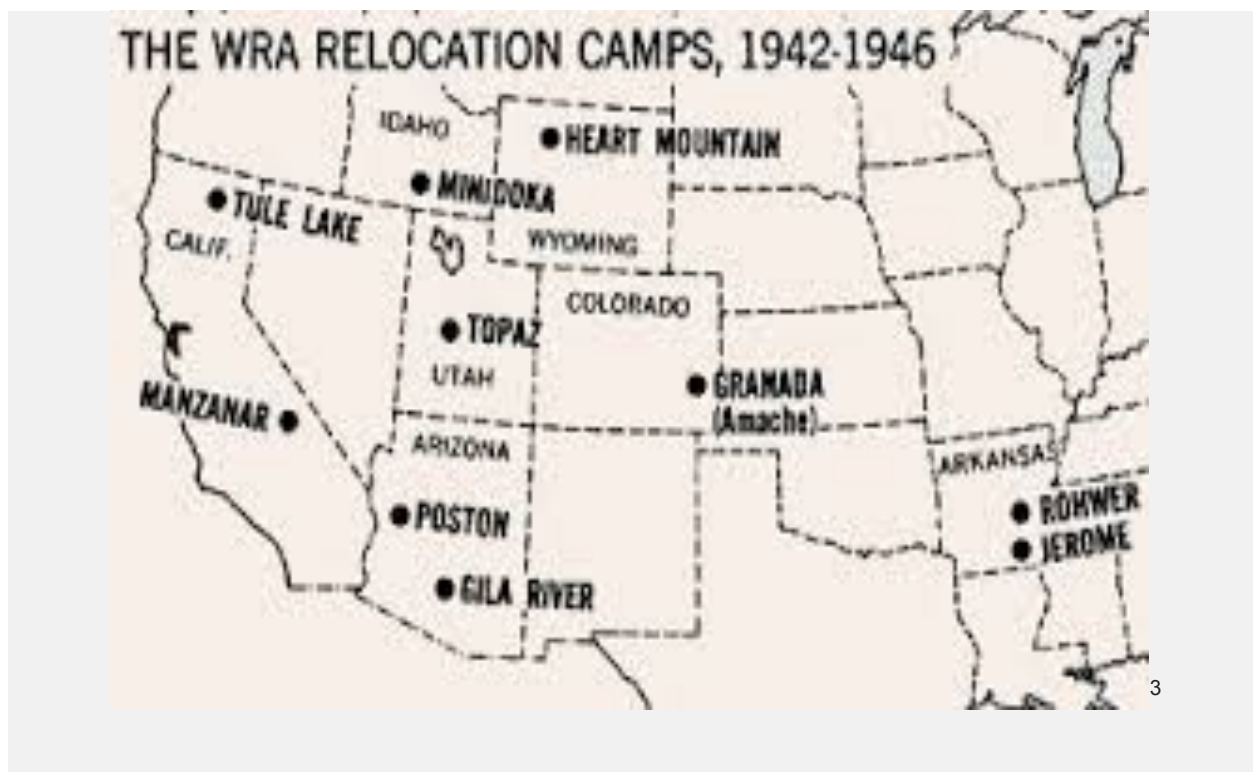
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<sup>1</sup> (Dewitt and Ross 1942)

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. This Executive Order gave serious power to the Secretary of War and several Military Commanders whom he felt could handle the events to follow. This document gave unlimited power to these men to do as they saw fit to whomever they felt could be a threat. So they started construction of the different relocation camps that the Japanese Americans and several other groups of people with different nationalities that the government felt could be a threat to the safety and wellbeing of the United States would live. This document paved the way for Executive Order 9102 which created the War Relocation Authority.<sup>2</sup> By June 4, 1942, the War Relocation Authority had selected ten sites spanning over seven different states. These occupants were sent to one and sometimes several of ten different camps for up to about three years. Of the ten different sites, there was one camp in Utah, one in Colorado, one in Idaho, one in Wyoming, two in California, two in Arizona and two in Arkansas. The Arkansas camps were the easternmost sites; one in Jerome and the other in Rower.

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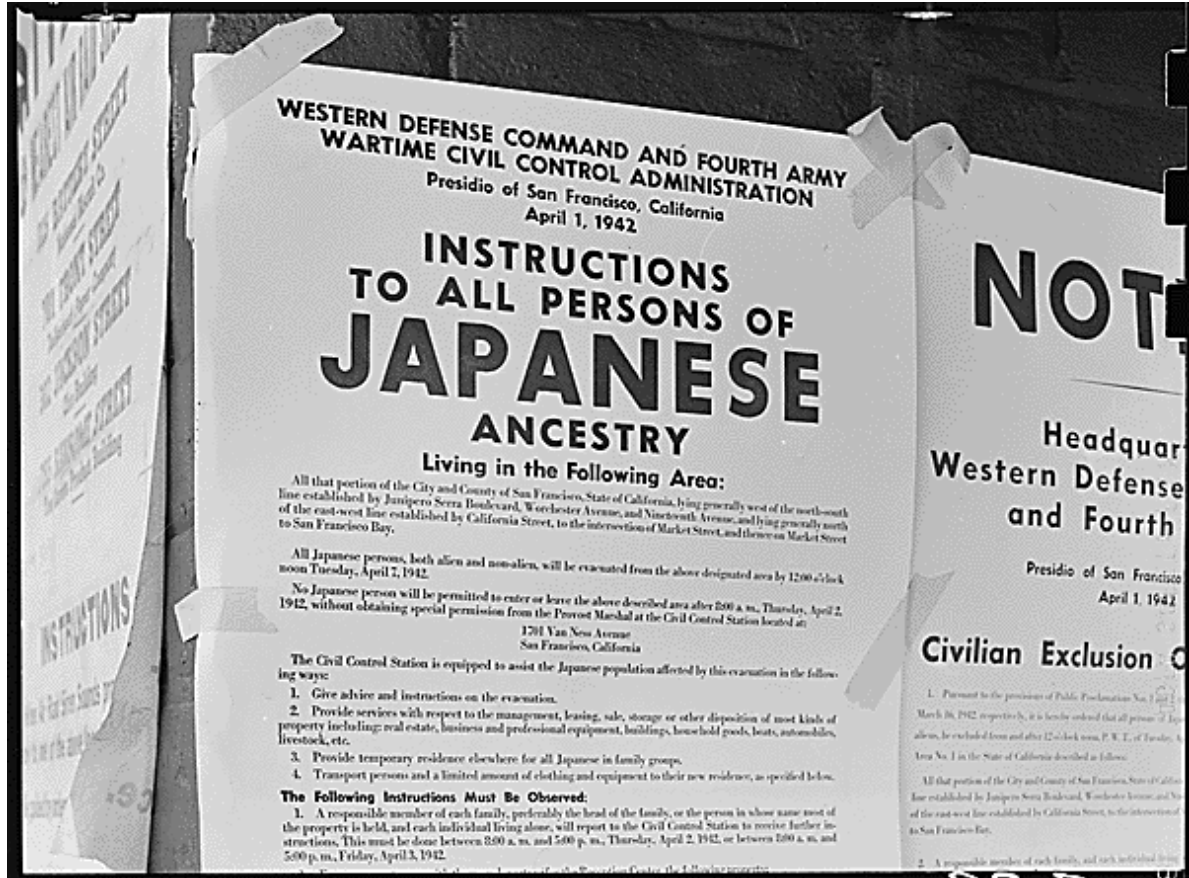
<sup>2</sup> (Vickers 1951, 169)



There were many different emotions that were flowing through the Japanese Americans while the news broke that they were going to be ripped out of their homes and places of work and be shipped to a completely unknown location. Then for those who did know the location; they had no clue what was in store for them. These people, whom the majority of were American citizens, were not even told face to face of the tragedy that was about to occur in their lives. Signs and Posters were put up around places in which the people of Japanese descent would see and tell others of the forthcoming events.

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<sup>3</sup> (The WRA Relocation Camps 1942-1946 1946)



The most overwhelming emotion of the people was confusion for most of the people who were able to write letters. In one account a woman named Nakamura stated she “didn’t know where we were”; she also stated that she didn’t know why the uprooting occurred.<sup>5</sup> While in the camps, a man named Kasuko Endo, who was from Oregon, wrote in an essay “we all became very shocked, since we were all of Japanese descent. We wondered how Japan could do such a thing to this peaceful land of ours.”<sup>6</sup> Many of the Japanese Americans did not really see themselves as Japanese; they saw themselves as American citizens. Just like Pat Aiko Amino, who was a ten-year-old when all of the issues for the Japanese Americans started, stated “it

<sup>4</sup> (Instructions to all persons of Japanese Ancestry 1942)

<sup>5</sup> (Benson 2004, 3 )

<sup>6</sup> (Benson 2004, 11)

doesn't have anything to do with us because I'm an American, you know. I was completely American."<sup>6</sup> The younger generation, especially the Nisei didn't understand why they were being taken from their homes and moved up to half way across the country. Although the majority of the comments that were documented from the Japanese Americans were very negative towards the situation they were in, there were some who were more optimistic about their situation. One account by a person named Tooru stated in a letter, "We are leaving our city, to where I am wholly ignorant. However I am not unhappy, nor do I have objections for as long as this evacuation is for the benefit of the United State."<sup>7</sup> Another optimistic Japanese American named Emiko stated in a letter to a previous teacher, "Wherever I go I will always be a loyal American."<sup>7</sup> So the attitude towards the actions that the government was sanctioning on the legal residents of the United States was not completely negative.

The first station in which the Japanese Americans were taken was the reception centers. They were separated into groups and then relocated to the internment camps in which they would live out the remainder of their time while the military leaders and the government felt they were still a threat to the country. The reception camps were very simple for they did not present as the most important living spaces that the government had to build for the War Relocation Authority.

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<sup>7</sup> (Pak 2002, ix, x)





These barracks could house anywhere from one family of five or six to two or three families; which could be anywhere from fourteen to twenty people in a very small barrack. After being held at the reception center the internees would be taken to any of the ten different sites where they lived for the remainder of their time of being incarcerated.

These camps would hold more than 110,000 Japanese Americans of whom the majority were United States citizens, as well as several other minority groups that the government deemed a threat to the country. The two camps in Arkansas were the farthest inland of any of the camps built for the War Relocation Authority. One of the camps that were opened in Arkansas was the camp in Rower. The construction on the premises of relocation center began July of 1942. The camp in Rower was about 500 acres large with nearly 300 people in ten to fourteen barracks, with each barrack being 20 feet by 120 feet which would be divided anywhere from four to six living quarters, like apartments, for Japanese American families. Then each block also contained a mess hall, a recreational barrack, a place to do laundry, and a communal bathroom. The barracks did not have running water. The barracks would be heated by wood or coal stoves in

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<sup>8</sup> (Albers 1942)

the winter. There was another section of the camp where the administrators and other faculty lived. Plus there were designated areas for the hospital section, military police section, a factory and a warehouse section. Although the majority of the camp was very plain and did not have much life to it; there was a section of the camp that was more of a bright spot for the internees. This section had barracks for school, also an auxiliary building for motion pictures, auditoriums, canteens, gymnasiums, motor pools, and fire stations.

The education system inside of the walls of the internment camps was very different from the educational experience that the children and young adults received outside the camps. The school system was set up to fail due to the lack of the budget set aside for them. “The Department of War admitted that “[b]ecause the [evacuation] program moved so rapidly,... no formal system of education or recreation was initially provided...and no initial budget provided”.<sup>9</sup> There was not any money to purchase anything that would help the students in the camps get a sufficient education. The school in the camp in Rower was terrible. The school was “opened in two blocks built for living quarters without supplies, equipment, high school textbooks and without enough teachers.... The pupils sat on crude benches to meet the emergency. Since there was no desk or tables, they often sat on the floor using the benches as desks”.<sup>9</sup> A student attending the school in Rower stated “School rooms are so very dusty. They are terribly crowded. Light is inadequate—no blinds and noise of band practicing is enough to drive a teacher to drink. Just found out that there was not even a dictionary to be had at the high school...”<sup>9</sup> These problems presented a very overwhelming issue for the educational system; the largest issue was that the schools were understaffed. There were not enough teachers to push the students to learn and to thrive. So no matter the number of books or the number of

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<sup>9</sup> (Wu 2007, 240, 241)

desks at the schools in the camps; there just were not enough teachers to teach all of the students. These problems with the education system existed for all of the internment camps that the Japanese Americans were living in all over the country.

Though the issue of education was important in the camps; the issue with the lack of quality medical equipment and doctors was even more important. There was an incident with a newborn baby that died due to lack of medical equipment and medical personnel to keep the child alive. Along with the lack of medical equipment; the camps were simply not prepared for what was to come. Within one month of all of the evacuees arriving in the camps; two babies had been born. One of which was weighed on the camps fish scale as a newborn.<sup>10</sup> Not only were the camps not equipped, they clearly were not sanitary. In a newspaper, near one of the camps, about two weeks after their arrival there was an article arguing for the conservation of the medical supplies. This argument was brought to life because they could barely supply aid to the critical members in the camp let alone everyone who was having trouble getting adjusted to the new climate.<sup>10</sup>

The diet of the internees was not a very nutritionally sound or very tasty at all for that matter. There were not ever any premium meats for them to eat. They were only served meat twice a week. So they ate a very similar meal every day and did not have the option to change. “Each evacuee ate on the average more than a half pound of rice each day.”<sup>10</sup> Milk was only given to newborn children, expecting mothers, or if any other medical condition deemed it necessary. The water presented a clear problem as well. A newspaper article was published soon after the Japanese Americans arrived in the camps about a widespread prevalence of

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<sup>10</sup> (Vickers 1951, 173, 174)

diarrhea inside the camps. This outbreak was likely caused by the new pipes in which the water came into the camps.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of rebellious behavior from adolescents also presented itself while the Japanese Americans were inside of the internment camps. Towards the beginning of their stays in the camps there were not a whole lot of issues in the camps; just a few of the high school level students at the Tule lake camp got caught cutting class, gambling and smoking.<sup>12</sup> The severity of their actions grew over the years in the camps. They formed gangs and started causing real problems for the authorities. In the Heart Mountain camp, there were twelve to fourteen-year-old youngsters going to parties and events that they weren't supposed to go to.<sup>12</sup> The actions that took place in the Granada camp were probably the worst of the gang activities that were seen. The group of adolescents in this camp destroyed several laundry rooms and several recreational halls. There was a large number of high school aged boys that participated in non-conformist behavior to protest against the system that was keeping them inside the camps and the from the war in general. "In late 1942 in Manzanar and Poston camps, juvenile gangs participated in a few strikes that broke out as a form of resistance against the imprisonment."<sup>12</sup>

Another element of the camps was much more positive. There were many different forms of entertainment that the internees would participate in to help pass the time and try and get away in a sense from the everyday troubles that were ever present around them. The younger of the internees would participate in several different sporting events. The War Relocation Authority encouraged the children to play sports that were predominantly from America such as football, basketball, baseball, softball and running events. The children would play whenever

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<sup>11</sup> (Vickers 1951, 174)

<sup>12</sup> (Benson 2004, 18)

they were given permission. Another activity the War Relocation Authority would encourage the younger Japanese Americans of the camps to join Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. There were also dance socials for the younger people of the camps. As well as the activities organized by the people in charge of the camps, the children would find other ways to entertain themselves. There were several young Nisei groups that formed bands that would perform for other internees. Another way the children would entertain themselves was by hiking the area that they had access to within their camp walls. Some of the children in the Tule Lake camp would catch wildlife like scorpions and rattlesnakes. The children would also search for collectables such as arrowheads, which gave them something to look forward to. These sorts of items gave the children something that they could call their own, and that was not something they had a lot of.

The Japanese Americans were kept in the internment camps without any sort of legal representation from March of 1942 until late in the year of 1945 for all of the camps other than Tule Lake Center where the internees were kept until October 30, 1946.

The Japanese Americans were given the opportunity to regain some of the value of the property that they lost due to their incarceration. On July 2, 1948, Harry S. Truman signed the Evacuation Claims Act to help get some of the money back to the people who had lost everything. The sum of the claims reached about \$30 million from nearly 23,000 different Japanese Americans. That amount reported to be about ten percent of the actual property lost by the people who were in the camp.

There was not anything going on with the Japanese Americans from the time President Truman signed the Evacuation claims act until February 19, 1976 when President Gerald Ford formally rescinded Executive Order No. 9066. The next and most important document to help

the Japanese Americans was the law passed with Ronald Reagan's signature: H. R. 442. This document was signed in August of 1988. Reagan officially admitted that the United States Government was wrong to put the Japanese Americans, who were citizens of the United States, in the internment camps during World War Two. He stated that this document was not as much about the property, but more about the honor of everyone who was wronged throughout the process. "The new statute establishes a trust fund from which tax-free payments of \$20,000 will be provided to the approximately 60,000 Japanese-American internees who are still alive."<sup>13</sup> The amount of \$20,000 in 1988 would be worth about \$40,000 in 2013. This document was the beginning of the end to long overdue justice to a group of people who were wronged many years prior. Ronald Reagan saw a wrong that the government, of which he was the head, had committed against the American people over forty years prior.

Although, both President Truman and President Reagan tried to give some assistance to the people who lost everything when they were interned in 1942; there is a case to be made that the amount owed to them is far greater than what they received. There are cases where Japanese Americans owned businesses and were forced to sell all their assets within a few days. This led to the people knowing that they had to sell, so they would holdout and buy the properties for exponentially less than they were worth. They were forced to sell everything that they could not carry. These people owned prime land for agriculture; where the value was not just in the physical property, but in the agriculture produced in the years after they had the land stripped from them. This also applies with the countless other businesses that were lost.

One of the most astounding facts about the entire process of the Japanese Americans being forced into internment camps was that none of them received any legal representation of

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<sup>13</sup> (Houston 1988)

any kind. The actions portrayed by General Dewitt, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and all of the other participants who helped intern the Japanese Americans broke laws dating back to the IV Amendment of the Bill of Rights laid down by the United States of America's founding fathers. The conditions of the reception and internment were awful from all aspects; from the barracks they lived in, to the food they were forced to eat, to the lack of proper education and medical care that should have been provided as a basic necessity to life. The obvious overlaps in the United States legal system created one of the darkest time periods in recent American history.

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