

Rebirth of a Japanese American Identity: The Crystal City Experience

By Jessica DeVoe

Introduction

Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European experience. . . . Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic control over the Orient.<1>

Cultural racism can generally be defined as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one race's cultural heritage over that of another race.<2>

Nativism, therefore, should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., "un-American") connections.<3>

Orientalism, racism, and nativism propel acts of discrimination in the United States. Discrimination developed rapidly and firmly in the United States because the government aided the public persecution of the 'other' for various social, political, and especially economic reasons. In his book on World War II, John Dower wrote, "Even while denouncing Nazi theories of 'Aryan' supremacy, the United States government presided over a society where blacks were subjected to demeaning Jim Crow laws, segregation was imposed even in the military establishment, racial discrimination extended to the defense industries and immigration policy was severely biased against all non whites."<4> This issue plays an integral part in the history of Japanese Americans, who moved to the United States in sizable numbers by the 1880s and has since endured discrimination in many forms.

Japanese Americans suffered the United States of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which falsely proclaimed the identity of a 'melting pot,' where all people united in the ultimate human quest: personal freedom. Unfortunately, the melting pot was no more than a myth, but Hirschman points out that at the time it served its purpose well:

the melting pot became the symbol of the liberal and radical American society . . . used to strengthen and legitimize the ideology of America as a land of opportunity where race, religion, and national origin should not be barriers to social mobility. There is another interpretation . . . which represents the emphasis on 'Americanization' of immigrants at the turn of the century.<5>

Hirschman's study 1983 focused on the many economic disadvantages suffered by minorities, but described Asians as 'middleman minorities' because they had achieved

"both above-average economic success and an unusual degree of economic solidarity. . . [One explanation suggests that] hostility from the majority population can strengthen ethnic solidarity, which allows the mobilization at low wages of workers with high motivations."<6> Indeed, responding to discrimination that had based itself on cultural and racial superiority, the Japanese Americans assumed an ethnic identity that embraced and remembered their turbulent history on the road to becoming an American citizen and did not let it stop them in their pursuit of a better life. With each act of discrimination, a moment of association was created, leading to pride and identity. The history of Japanese Americans exemplifies how people reacted to different forms of discrimination by affirming their uniquely American heritage. Although discrimination sought to exclude Japanese people from American society, it actually created the close-knit Japanese American community.

In the preface to her work, *Breaking the Silence*, Yasuko I. Takezawa states, "I emphasize historical experience to demonstrate that in the Japanese American case ethnicity has been transformed and reconstructed through reinterpretation of past experience in the America social context."<7> She points to the war treatment of approximately 120,000 Japanese American citizens and permanent resident aliens during the 1940s and consequent redress movement during the 1970s and 1980s as defining moments for the Japanese American identity. In theory, the war relocation and hostility witnessed by Japanese children during World War II resulted in their uniting close together; after leaving the camps, many attended college and established themselves as a member of society, whereupon the redress movement took hold. The redress movement gained momentum in the 1980, with the establishment of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, who published their findings in 1982, including the testimonies of over 750 internees. By the mid-1980s, Japanese Americans had grown considerably in economic power, garnering enough votes to pass the Civil Liberties Act on August 10, 1988, which was signed by President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act. It formally apologized for the forced evacuation, relocation, and internment during World War II.

The government acknowledged the injustice, offering monetary compensation and the promise of public education on the matter. The money offered in 1988 amounted to \$20,000 for 60,000 survivors. Other individuals were made eligible for money in future amendments to the act, such as non-Japanese Americans whose Japanese spouses were interned. However, the monetary compensation was not equal to the four million dollars lost in 1943, through property and business loss. Furthermore, the public education fund to "prevent the recurrence of any similar event,"<8> has managed to keep the United States' internment camps one of the least covered topics in American history.

California Registered Historic Landmark No. 850, site of former relocation camp Manzanar, a plaque reads: "May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism, and economic exploitation never emerge again."<9> Wrongly accused and unjustly removed from society, the Japanese Americans during World War II suffered the greatest American indignity. They were denied the right to live freely and own property by the very people who represented the American government, a republic

founded on the pursuit of these same inalienable human rights. The entire United States government took part in the plan to ‘handle’ a nonexistent Japanese threat on the West Coast—among them were President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lieutenant General John L. Dewitt and the United States Army, Milton Eisenhower and the Department of Justice, the Department of War, the United States Congress, and even the Supreme Court. Their plan during World War II was neither the product of war hysteria nor military necessity, as the government claimed. Rather, war hysteria provided the catalyst and military necessity provided the rationalization for an embarrassing act of racial injustice.

An internment camp site in Texas, known as Crystal City, demands attention because of its unique place among the other internment camps: it housed more than one race—Japanese Americans, Japanese Latin Americans, German Americans, Italian Americans, and Indonesians. Also, the only designated ‘family internment camp,’ Crystal City proposed to reunite interned fathers with their wives and children (most Japanese women and children internees were voluntary)<10>, most of whom had not seen each other in two years. Finally, the Department of Justice established Crystal City instead of the WRA, which was created to regulate the relocation sites and the ten internment camps situated throughout the southwest United States. Crystal City is an ideal camp with which to examine the transformation of Japanese ethnicity because of the close community formed there.

So close was the family community formed during the years at Crystal City that for their Fiftieth Anniversary Reunion in Monterey, California, in 1993, the surviving internees put together a book containing their memories of camp life, including school newspaper clips, headlines about their parents’ arrest, and selected excerpts from scholarly articles. Most importantly, though, they included their own personal stories of how their family ended up at Crystal City. The stories and memories of the internees of Crystal City, as they remember them fifty years later, demonstrate the capacity to which people treat each other, in terms of both the government’s treatment of the Japanese Americans and their treatment of each other within the camps, and how it changed their views of their own ethnicity. One of the foremost Asian American historians, Roger Daniels, refers to the story of all Japanese internees as “essentially, one of survival.”<11> Crystal City commemorates the survival not only of the Japanese Americans in the camp, but the survival of their spirit, their pride, and their character.

After establishing the history of the Japanese from their entrance into the United States to World War II internment and its repercussions, one can see how economic exploitation proved the most moving force behind many acts of discrimination, leading to social stereotypes and political oppression. Through Crystal City, this history becomes clear, and the memories of adults who now understand what they went through as children shed new light on the internment experience, beautifully identifying the remarkable metamorphoses of what it means to be Japanese American.

Origins of Asian Stereotypes in America

The history of American discrimination against Asians begins where the history of anything American begins: centuries ago in Europe. In the thirteenth century, the Crusades against the dark-skinned Muslim infidel were somewhat put on hold by another batch of dark-skinned enemies: the Mongols. Genghis Kahn's onslaught of Europe resulted in the largest land empire in history, covering all of Asia, down to Turkey, and as far west as Hungary. During their short reign of power over Europe, the Mongols regulated overland trade routes, between Europe and China, opening Europeans eyes to the land of silk and tea. However, just as quickly as Genghis had risen to power, the Mongols withdrew into China, leaving the Europeans with unguarded, arduous trade routes and a wanting for Oriental goods. Never again has an Asian force posed such a threat to the West as the feared Mongols.

Two results came of the Crusades end by the Mongol invasion. First, the idea of the brown Eastern barbarian had planted itself in the minds Europeans. The fact that Europe was a political jumble in comparison to the East, their brown skin and savage cultural inclinations made them appear brutally innocent, childlike even. Second, a cultural mishmash occurred between the Occidental and the Orient, leaving Europe with a world of new technology and the luxuries. The Orient was new and exciting, filled with riches. Thus, a new identity of Asians had been created: commodity.<[12](#)>

The Age of Exploration and the settlement of the Americas during the fifteenth century began as a search for a quicker, cheaper way to the Orient and its wonderful commodities. After the Mongols withdrew to China, the overland trade routes became unbearable and Europeans strove to develop a sea route to the Orient, called the Northwest Passage. Early in settlement of America, Euro-Americans encountered and quickly exercised cultural superiority over two new groups of dark-skinned people: American Indians and African slaves. There are even character comparisons made between Indians and Orientals in the *Jesuit Relations*: "The medicine-men, as bitterly fanatical as the howling dervishes of the Orient, plotted the destruction of the messengers of the new faith."<[13](#)> The comparisons are made solely on basis of skin color, and the barbaric Indians were considered to be of much less formidable character: "I do not claim here to put our Savages on a level with the Chinese, Japanese, and other nations perfectly civilized."<[14](#)> The American Indians were exploited for their furs, crops, and land while the African slaves were exploited for their labor. These early relations between white and non-white people in America established the tradition of white supremacy. Dark-skinned people were culturally and intellectually inferior, necessary only as a tool for economic gain for white people. This view developed over time and by the mid-nineteenth century, nativism and racism was widespread and apparent. This is the country to which the first Asian immigrants arrived.

According to the Passenger Cases of 1849, immigration was "constitutionally, foreign commerce."<[15](#)> By opening Chinese ports in 1844 and Japanese ports in 1854, the

doors of commerce swung open and Asians viewed America as a chance to find a new home. Therefore, the immigration of Asians to the United States in the mid-1800s represented the long overdue accomplishment of the original goal of the Age of Exploration: the Northwest Passage had finally materialized in the establishment of trade with the East, and included in this trade was immigration. Between the years of 1851 and 1950, a total of 1,111,722 Asian immigrants entered the United States,<16> the two largest and earliest groups being the Chinese and Japanese.

In 1844, Shanghai and three other Chinese ports opened to trade with the United States. China opened eleven more ports shortly thereafter. Masses of single, Chinese men entered the United States in the late 1840s, emigrating from Kwantung province, where political strife and social upheaval pushed them to seek prosperity elsewhere.<17> The Chinese men hoped to find gold and become rich gentlemen. Stories of a Gold Mountain circulated and incorporated itself into Chinese folksongs:

In the second reign year of Haamfing (1852), a trip to Gold Mountain was made

With a pillow on my shoulder, I began my perilous journey

Sailing a boat with bamboo poles across the sea,

Leaving behind wife and sisters in search of money

No longer lingering with the woman in the bedroom

No longer paying respect to parents at home.<18>

Although most of the immigrants did not find gold, they did find employment with the Central Pacific Railroad Company, who respectively discovered their largest source of hardworking, cheap labor. Among the other workers for the Central Pacific Railroad were Californian Mexicans, at whom the 1850 Foreign Miners Tax was aimed. The 1850 Foreign Miners Tax economically sought to root out colored workers from jobs. Although it was directed towards Latino workers, Chinese workers suffered more, because they made up the bulk of the Central Pacific Railroad labor force.

1. No person who is not a native or natural born citizen of the United States, or may not have become a citizen under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo . . . shall be permitted to mine in any part of this State, without having first obtained a license so to do according to the provisions of this Act . . .

6. Every person required by the first section of this Act to obtain license to mine, shall apply to the Collector of License to foreign miners, and take out a license to mine, for which he shall pay the sum of twenty dollars per month . . .[<19>](#)

Since the opening of Chinese ports proved to be a commercial gain through trade, the labor force, and the foreign tax, the United States arranged trade relations with China's less visible neighbor.

Japan had withdrawn from the rest of the world, having maintained a policy of isolation since 1639. Even when foreign sailors wrecked on Japanese shores, they were not allowed to leave the country. In 1853, President Millard Fillmore commissioned Commodore Matthew Perry to go on an expedition to Japan. Officially, Commodore Perry was to speak on behalf of beach wrecked American whalers, although establishing trade was the underlying reason for the trip.

"The real object of the expedition," [Perry] explained, "should be concealed from public view, under a general understanding that its main purpose will be to examine the usual resorts of our whaling ships, with special reference to their protection, and the opening to them of new ports of refuge and refreshment"[<20>](#)

In 1854, Japanese ports were opened because Commodore Matthew Perry intruded into a country that wished to remain alone, and intimidated the Japanese with America's advanced technology in order to establish 'friendly' trade relations.

Perry thought that the sudden arrival of an American squadron "would doubtless produce great surprise, and confusion, and every means, including force, would be devised by the Japanese (for they are a shrewd and cunning people) to get rid of intruders." The Americans, however, should remain on the defensive, responding with force only as circumstance demanded. In this way, Perry was confident that "a favourable issue to the enterprise might reasonably be expected."[<21>](#)

As seen in this quote, even before the Japanese arrived in America, they were believed to be shrewd and cunning. Envoy Townsend Harris furthered the results of Perry's trade agreement with the opening of five more Japanese ports in the Harris Convention of 1858. By the 1880s, the Japanese government ended their policy of isolation, and migration to the United States quickly followed.

With the Chinese and other immigrants, the Japanese shared similar hopes and dreams of American life: prosperity and freedom from political oppression. This haiku offers a Japanese vision of prosperity:

Huge dreams of fortune

Go with me to foreign lands

Across the ocean.<[22](#)>

Though the political turmoil encouraged Asian emigration, their settlement in the United States aided the opening of the ports, by solidifying a commercial relationship between the United States and the East; an unexpected result of the opening of the ports was its profound influence on the political and social situations along the West Coast. The opening of the ports defined and confirmed the American view of the Orient as commodity and Asian immigrants unknowingly entered a country predisposed to exploiting dark-skinned people. Asians soon learned how racially-oriented the United States really was with the quick emergence of their most defining label: the Yellow Peril.

When the Chinese first arrived in California, they received warm welcome. In the *Daily Alta California*, one writer described them: "Quite a large number of Celestials have arrived among us of late, enticed thither by the golden romance that has filled the world."<[23](#)> Unfortunately, 'exotic novelty' wears quickly and the unassimilated character of the Chinese was not well received. In mid-1852, California Governor John Bigler suggested to the legislature that California needed to restrict the number of Chinese immigrants. Asian historian Roger Daniels refers to this incident as "the formal political beginning of the anti-Chinese movement."<[24](#)> Outraged by the Governor's remarks, the Chinese community responded—the following is an excerpt from Norman Asing's letter to the editor of the *Daily Alta California*:

The effect of your late message has been thus far to prejudice the public mind against my people, to enable those who wait the opportunity to hunt them down, and rob them of the rewards of their toil. . . . We would beg to remind you that when your nation was a wilderness, and the nation from which you sprung *barbarous*, we exercised most of the arts and virtues of civilized life; that we are possessed of a language and a literature, and that men skilled in science and arts are numerous among us; that the productions of our manufactories, our sail, and workshops, form no small commerce of the world . . . We are not the degraded race you would make us.<[25](#)>

Despite Asing's powerfully worded testament to the development of Chinese civilization, the idea of the 'degraded race' remained. West Coast newspapers proclaimed that Chinese men stole jobs and women from hardworking white, American men. This description alludes to the racist and nativist discriminations against their skin color and likewise, their character. In 1854, the case of *People vs. Hall* threw out a Chinese man's testimony used to convict a murderer because the Chinese man should never have been allowed to testify. Justice Hugh Murray declared that the minority status of the Chinese, and likewise, all persons of Asian decent, was in fact dependent upon their brown skin:

"Indians as commonly used refers only to North American Indians, yet in the days of Columbus all shores washed by Chinese waters were called the Indies. In second place the word 'white' necessarily excludes all other races than Caucasian; and in the third place, even if this were not so, I would have decided against testimony of Chinese on grounds of public policy."<[26](#)>

A similar court case in 1885 illustrates racial injustices against Chinese people: Chan Yong unsuccessfully petitioned for American citizenship because of the specification in the 1798 Naturalization Act that United States citizens must be white. Three other acts were passed along with the Naturalization Act in 1798: Alien Act, Act Respecting Alien Enemies, and Sedition Act. These acts were passed while the Federalist Party was apprehensive over the pending war with France and their significant decline in political power. After passing the Naturalization Act, which upped the residency required of citizenship from five to fourteen years, the other acts were passed in order to control the aliens as they waited on their citizenship, if they would even be eligible for it. Specific powers granted within these acts:

There were even more weighty objections to the Alien Enemies Act: it limited the powers of the government to alien *enemies* alone and, as a Republican congressman suggested, the Federalists were much more eager to move against alien *friends*, particularly the Irish, than against alien enemies. Whether or not war broke out in France, it would be relatively easy to round up French subjects, but the Irish and English radicals resident in the United States were not so easily disposed of. . . . it was held necessary to accompany the Alien Enemies Act with a law giving the Federal government power to deport, in time of peace, all aliens . . . suspected of being engaged in subversive activities."<[27](#)>

These acts would come back and haunt the Japanese Americans during World War II, when the right to apprehend enemy aliens would be applied liberally and extensively along the West Coast.

The emergence of the Know-Nothing party in the 1854 placed nativism within the field of politics, aiming to vote the rowdy Catholic Irish and German immigrants out of office. The Know-Nothings were a precursor for the American party of the 1880s, this one aimed directly at Asians. Support for these parties was provided by nativist groups like State Grange, American Legion, and Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, all of whom opposed and feared the 'Yellow Peril.'

Not just in politics, but the education system too, sought to displace the Chinese from regular American society. In 1859, twenty years before the Japanese even arrived in the United States, a California superintendent attempted to segregate Chinese children from

public schools, saying "the great mass of our citizens will not associate on terms of equality with these inferior races; nor will they consent that their children should do so."[28](#)

By the time of the Japanese arrival in the 1880s, American people were no longer tolerant of minorities. Half the country was recuperating from the Civil War and the West was in a constant state of development. In 1907, the San Francisco school board tried to send the Japanese students to the Chinese school, supported by the newly formed Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, originally founded in May 1905 as the Japanese Asiatic Exclusion League. This angered the Emperor of Japan who did not want Japanese students studying with their longtime rival, the Chinese, and the trade relationship between Japan and the United States appeared suddenly unstable. President Theodore Roosevelt rushed in and negotiated a Gentlemen's Agreement, wherein the Emperor of Japan would curtail the number of passports they gave out and the West Coast would not segregate their schools.

During these early years of the twentieth century, the Yellow Peril fever died down for a while, but the Japanese were far from being treated equally. In 1913, the first Alien Land Law was passed in California, remanding non-citizens to a three-year leases of owning land and seven years later, prohibited even the leasing of land. This was followed by the Supreme Court case in 1922, *Ozawa v United States*, in which the Naturalization Act once again prohibited an Oriental from attaining citizenship. Despite these hardships, referred to by Blum as "Jap Crow" laws,[29](#) the number of Japanese immigrants simply increased. Between 1900 and 1920, the population of Japanese in America went from 12,626 to 72,000. The numbers violently dropped with the passage of the Immigration, or Oriental Exclusion, Act of 1924, which ended immigration. During the Great Depression, bitter Californians looked to blame someone for their troubles and the Asian minority was an obvious choice. Newspaper headlines screamed "The Yellow Peril—how Japanese crowd out the white race" and "Japanese a menace to American women."[30](#)

By the late 1930s, the Yellow Peril was in full effect because Japan had become a powerful threat: "The most immediate and alarming aspect of the Yellow Peril was always the vision of the vast multitudes of Asia uniting and advancing on Europe and the Western Hemisphere like the reborn hordes of Genghis Kahn."[31](#) There was concern whether the Japanese people would remain loyal to America or Japan. The underlying reason for all this suspicion was "the nature and scope of Japan's early military successes in the Pacific."[32](#) After all, Japan had attacked and taken nearly every American occupied territory in the Pacific. Economically, the United States lost a great deal of natural resource. "Japan's belated emergence as a dominant power in Asia . . . challenged the entire mystique of white supremacism, which centuries of European and American expansion had rested."[33](#)

Between 1939 and 1941, the FBI, Department of Justice, and the intelligence divisions of the Army and Navy secretly investigated the loyalty of the Japanese population along the West Coast and in Hawaii, making lists of all influential Japanese people: priests, businessmen, and proprietors, among others. More concern focused on the Issei, first

generation Japanese immigrants who had moved to the United States at the turn of the century and were usually alien residents, because they were denied citizenship. Their children, the Nisei, were born in the United States, thereby making them American citizens. Lieutenant Commander Kenneth D. Ringle "reported officially in 1941 'that better than 90% of the Nisei and 75% of the original immigrants were completely loyal to the United States."[<34>](#)

World War II

On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, an impact such an event that would bring America into the war and inflicted open discrimination as war policy upon Japanese American citizens and residents. Within hours of the bombing, the lists of names were pulled and arrests began. "Over 5,000 Issei and Nisei were pulled in by the FBI, most of whom were subsequently released after interrogation or examination before Alien Enemy hearing boards. Over 2,000 Issei suspects bore the anguish of having businesses and careers destroyed, reputations defiled in being shipped to distant Department of Justice detention camps for an indefinite stay."[<35>](#) Among the Hawaiians arrested was fifteen-year-old Mary Mariko's father:

On December 7, 1941, about 1 p.m., in the midst of my step-mother's funeral service at Nichiren Shu Temple, two plain clothesmen approached papa and said to come with them. Papa asked if they could wait until the funeral service was over, but they said no. Papa told me, "I'll be right back" and they took him away to Sand Island.[<36>](#)

Many of these December 7 arrests took place in Hawaii, although this was not the case for the whole of the relocation and internment experience. While the entire Japanese population on the West Coast totaled a mere two percent of the entire population and the Japanese comprised one in every three people in Hawaii, only 1,500 of the 120,000 internees were taken from Hawaii. Despite Secretary of the Navy Knox's assertion that relocation was most necessary in Hawaii, many of them were spared the relocation because of economic concern that the labor force and businesses would suffer. Ogawa and Fox found that "because a significant portion of the territory's economy depended on Japanese labor, mass internment or relocation based on the West Coast model was not practical."[<37>](#) The better treatment of the Hawaiians further supports that the United States still viewed the Japanese people from the economic point of view. Simply because the Japanese figured prominently in the economy of Hawaii, they were spared the indignity of their West Coast counterparts.

Among these indignities was having property confiscated and their private lives questioned and scrutinized. Hatanakas remember their house being searched: "When they

saw a photo of a cousin in his Japanese uniform, they accused us of honoring a Japanese soldier."<38> Confiscated items included "contraband, photos, cameras, and anything that showed pro-Japan feelings."<39> Hisa Imamura Koike recalled,

[The FBI found] a gas motor for small model airplane and direction sheets important enough to confiscate them along with a certificate from the Emperor of Japan commanding Mrs. Koike for teaching Japanese language to the children in the Imperial Valley. Mr. Koike was a 'poor' farmer who loved to teach kendo. At that time, the LA Times had connected kendo groups with the Black Dragon Society in Japan.<40>

The idea of a hostile enemy applied to any person with visible signs of Japanese ancestry. Not even military veterans received benefit of doubt. Sei Dyo remembers:

No explanation was ever given to our family as to why my father was separated from our family. Nor other families for that matter. Nearly all of our fathers were taken from our families without "due process of law", no trial, hearing, or anything.

We believe that because of the leadership in our community, my father was believed to be dangerous enough to instigate riots. Far be it, for my father served in the U.S. Army under General Pershing with a Captain's rank, and it is a total shame that an event of this nature should take place for a man who served for the United States Army.

Conscientious objectors were among the few groups who protested the internment:

In December 1942, COs at the CPS camps in Placerville, CA, tried to ship a large package of handcrafted Christmas toys to children living in a Japanese Internment camp in Arizona. . . . the sheriff told the camps' assistant director: 'It may have been all right to make toys, but I can't see why you fellows should want to send them to those dirty, yellow-bellied sons-of-bitches when there are lots of needy white children around here.<41>

On the 'Day of Infamy,' February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed EO 9066. This order gave Lieutenant General DeWitt the leeway necessary to issue a Public Proclamation on March 2, which outlined the military areas on the West Coast from where Japanese were excluded. Basically, EO 9066 sanctioned the exclusion of Japanese people from designated military zones along the West Coast, covering Arizona all the way up to Washington. DeWitt placed all Japanese Americans under curfew, relegating them to their homes between 8pm and 6am. On March 19, Roosevelt signed

EO 9102, which established the WRA to regulate the relocation and internment to camps in the middle of empty fields and deserts or in the mountains, where people lived until 1947. The fully executed evacuation lasted from March of 1942 well through 1944. "All this was done despite the fact that not a single act of espionage, sabotage, or fifth column activity was committed by an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the West Coast."<[42](#)>

Signs were posted all over the West Coast with the headline: **Instructions to all persons of JAPANESE ancestry.** The Japanese were to first assemble at one of fifteen centers, twelve of which were in California and one each in Washington, Oregon, and Arizona. From the assembly center, they were sent to one of the ten WRA camps. Aside from the WRA, The Justice Department headed four more camps: Santa Fe, New Mexico; Bismarck, North Dakota; Missoula, Montana; and Crystal City, Texas. For all of the moving they did, the only items families were allowed to bring with them were bedding items, toilet articles, extra clothing, and basic kitchen utensils. No furniture or cars could be brought, storage was not provided, and most Issei bank accounts were frozen. Yosh Yasuda wrote, "We tried desperately to sell the store—no takers. We ended up having closeout sales of up to 50% off and finally sold what was left for \$200. Our 1938 Buick went for \$50."<[43](#)> The Okazakis wound up repatriating to Japan after the War, because "family business and property in Santa Monica, CA, were non-existent"<[44](#)>

The WRA camps were largely unhealthy because they were converted race tracks and fair grounds, and abandoned housing compounds. Some people found themselves living in pig pens and horse stalls at assembly centers. At Santa Anita, a converted race track, the Takahashis were living in horse stables, but "everybody had to get inoculated because of disease from the stables. Some people died."<[45](#)> The most notorious of the WRA camps was Manzanar, which received attention from a photo essay by renown photographer Ansel Adams. The prototype of the bad internment camp, Manzanar was crowded, dirty, and did more than remove Japanese Americans from society: it removed social norms from their lives. Mess halls prevented the ritual family dinner and central facilities fostered an environment lacking privacy.

The entire evacuation, relocation, and internment was urged by DeWitt, who considered it a 'military necessity,' in order to insure the support of the war effort by the white population on the West Coast. Many white civilians of the West Coast did not trust nor like Japanese people. In a telephone conversation, DeWitt commented to Major Bendetsen, after speaking with Governor Culbert L. Olson of California, "they feel they are living in the midst of a lot of enemies. They don't trust the Japanese, none of them."<[46](#)>

Japanese Americans clearly presented no treacherous threat to the West Coast. The white population was distrustful and fearful for more xenophobic reasons rather than military. Regardless, the Supreme Court ruled several times in the 1940s in favor of the military treatment of the Japanese during wartime. In 1943, *Hirabayashi v. United States* and *Yasui v. United States*, the curfew restrictions were upheld. In 1944, *Korematsu v. United States*, the exclusion of a single race was upheld. Although Justice Frank Murphy pointed

out "this exclusion [falls] into the ugly abyss of racism,"[<47>](#) the vote was 6-3 in favor of the exclusion. Justice Hugo Black remarked "when under conditions of modern warfare our shores are threatened by hostile forces, the power to protect must be commensurate with the threatened danger. [To] cast this into outlines of racial prejudice, without reference to the real military dangers which were presented merely confuses the issue."[<48>](#) One court case to uphold the rights of a Japanese American was the 1944 *Ex Parte Endo*, which ruled that the WRA does not have the right to detain a loyal American. These cases were all reopened in the 1980s: Korematsu was granted a writ of error *coram nobis* in 1983, and the convictions of both Yasui and Hirabayashi were vacated because the government admitted that wartime policy for Japanese civilians was obvious discrimination; even Milton Eisenhower, director of the WRA, admitted, "I feel most deeply that when the war is over and we consider calmly this unprecedented migration of 120,000 people, we as Americans are going to regret the unavoidable injustices that may have been done."[<49>](#)

These unavoidable injustices ruined the Japanese family unit, for Japanese parents already had enough trouble teaching their American children to value the traditional Japanese culture, a culture from a country to which most of these children had never been. Yet in America, the children were faced with the most blatant, degrading act of racism possible: denial of their natural born rights to live freely as an American. This cultural and generational gap can be examined through Crystal City.

Crystal City, Texas

Crystal City was one of four camps under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice, designated a 'family internment camp.' Ideally designed to reunite many Japanese families of wives and children to the husbands and fathers who had been living separately in different camps, Crystal City came complete with jobs, schools, private bathrooms, personal kitchens, a swimming pool, and room for sporting and social events. In comparison to Manzanar, it was a much healthier and happier place to be. Michi Weglyn commented, "internees at the Crystal City 'family camp' received far better treatment . . . than citizen inmates of relocation centers."[<50>](#)

Regardless of its stature as a better relocation camp, it remained a relocation camp nonetheless. Crystal City still had the 24-hour guard duty, a daily headcount, and the same barbed-wire fences described by Roger Daniels about other camps: "the barbed-wire fences, the guards, and the surrounding wasteland were always there to remind the detainees that they were exiled, incarcerated Americans, who didn't even know whether they would ever be allowed to return to their former homes."[<51>](#)

Crystal City officials largely left it up to each group to take care of all social functions—they celebrated their own festivals and created their own organizations. Each group within Crystal City had its own agenda. Unique to the Crystal City is the cultural confrontation which took place between different cultures of people living there—Japanese, German, Italian, and Indonesian people, and between the generations of people within each group. Nisei internee Edison Uno remarked that "Crystal City was the only wartime measure that brought together aliens representing Germans, Italians, and Japanese all in one vast camp."<[52](#)>

There was concern over the presence of more than one race within the same camp. The Japanese internees went all the way to the Spanish Consul, whose neutrality allowed for them to speak on their behalf to the American government, saying that the housing of different races was against the rules laid out by the Geneva Convention. Thomas Walls wrote, "with the presence of different nationalities in one internment camp came the possibility of racial conflict, yet there were actually few difficulties between the Japanese and Germans. The biggest problem was the Geneva Convention, which clearly forbade confinement of two or more national groups in the same camp."<[53](#)> Regardless, internees of several different ethnic origins were housed in Crystal City until 1947.

While the WRA camps' mess halls and public facilities made family life a struggle and the development of the nuclear unit nearly impossible, family strife at Crystal City was different. Crystal City was designed for each group of people (Japanese, Germans . . .) to have a spokesman who would speak on their behalf with Crystal City officials; not much interaction took place between the Japanese and officials, with the exception of the guard watch. The Issei were in charge of running the community—Japanese pride swelled and the Nisei found themselves thrust into unknown territory. Aside from the American high school at Crystal City, known as Federal High School, the Issei also opened a Japanese school because they planned to repatriate to Japan and wanted their children to know how to behave.

The effects of the At Federal High School, the newspapers included columns on new arrivals and departures. The high school yearbook, entitled The Round-Up, echoed the memories of how the students were brought together at Federal High School and how the students and teachers worked to make the high school as American as any other high school, complete with a student government and national honor society. Conversely, at the Japanese school, Nisei studied Japanese language and custom.

Although they may have hated it at the time, many Nisei from Crystal City credit the Japanese school with having given them an appreciation of a culture they otherwise never would have known. Kim Hayakawa Takahashi recalled the grief she and her Nisei friends caused for their Japanese teacher: "We didn't want to take algebra in Japanese. We were so stubborn we went on strike. Poor Rev. Yamashita . . . whenever our algebra teacher started for the door, we would hold the door, so he couldn't come in, or if he did, we ignored him."<[54](#)>

Some Nisei resented even being in Crystal City at all. While most children and wives at Crystal City were voluntary internees, but not all Nisei were willing to give up their rights, as Joy Nozaki remembered:

to go to Crystal City Family Reunion Center was not my choice . . . it appeared I would be going to Syracuse . . . I had written Father of my intentions, when one day, a package arrived . . . there was a note from Father. It tersely stated that if I did not go to Crystal City, I would no longer be his daughter. I cried then."<[55](#)>

She does not regret the experience now. Nozaki credits Crystal City as "having opened up a new world for me . . . Japanese culture as I had never known before."<[56](#)> Susie Masuda Sasagawa also remembers her introduction and change in attitude to the Japanese culture:

Returning to our old two-room red brick elementary school [after the internment] was embarrassing . . . We had to recondition ourselves to think American. I wanted to forget the years we spent in Japanese school in internment camp . . .

we owe so much to the Issei, for they conducted themselves with dignity and projected our race in a manner we should all be proud of . . . I feel I have gained so much even though the war years interrupted my life.<[57](#)>

Nisei resented camp also because they were actual American citizens, wholly unfamiliar with Japan. Edison Uno and his friends amusingly protested one night by pretending to be drunk and serenading the night watch with a rendition of "Don't Fence Me In," but not all protests were so fun. When the draft was applied to the internees, Sei Dyo's father "protested in behalf of the Japanese in the camps that so long as the Nisei were interned and having their citizenship rights taken away, they should not be subject to the draft."<[58](#)>

The application of the draft to the internees caused an uproar for many Issei and Nisei. Despite their internment and treatment, more than 25,000 Japanese American men and women served in the military. In a twist of irony, the 442nd Combat team, an all-Japanese fighting unit, helped liberate the people of Dachau while their parents were interned in camps, not knowing when they might be able to leave or what they would do when the left.

The Issei-Nisei confrontation in Crystal City brought about a new understanding of what it meant to be American, both to the children and to their parents, an understanding unique to the atmosphere of Crystal City. Yosh Yasuda wrote, "raised in the old Japanese custom of not bringing shame to your family, we were taught to persevere, endure, work hard . . . and to a great extent due to the brave acts of our fellow Nisei soldiers, we

prevailed. As we meet for our reunion, we are a unique bunch who have come a LONG, LONG WAY!!!!"[<59>](#)

The children had never realized before how Japanese in custom their parents were and the parents had not realized how American in behavior their children were. The greatest example of this confrontation manifests itself in the American high school Prom. The parents protested so strongly that it was included in the "Historical Narrative of the Crystal City Internment Camp" in the Immigration and Naturalization Service Report to the Bureau of the Budget:

The Japanese complimented us on everything that we did until the final social, which was to be the highlight of the year—the Junior-Senior Prom. The Japanese Spokesman decided that he would break this up. He sent a notice to the parents to keep boys and girls at home; some did but enough students came to make it a very enjoyable affair. The student's delight was short-lived. Most of the students attending the American school took one hour of Japanese language and custom after the American school was dismissed. The Japanese school teachers resigned because they had failed to teach the harm in dancing. Some of the students were overjoyed, as they did not have to attend Japanese school anymore; some were heartbroken at the insinuations cast upon them. After a conference with the Officer in Charge, the Japanese school was re-opened. As a last 'shot' at the prom, the spokesman wrote a letter of protest to the Commissioner, who reminded them that these children were American citizens merely following American customs and traditions.[<60>](#)

Nisei remember the fuss over Prom as well. Yae Kanogawa Aihara was a luckier than other Nisei; his father supported the prom:

On the day of prom, a notice was circulated throughout the camp 'forbidding' students to attend, saying only prostitutes engaged in dancing. This angered father so much he practically ordered me to go to the prom. But boy, did this get my Japanese teacher into hot water. To this day I think of the anguish my actions surely must have caused him.[<61>](#)

Although Nisei repatriated to Japan with their parents, many returned quickly, leaving behind them scarring memories of desolate Uraga. Joy Nozaki was among the repatriates. Her experience in Japan reminded her that she was not Japanese, but American: "One fact driven home with startling clarity was our realization that we were Americans, no matter our features and skin."[<62>](#) The Nisei went to college and when they were older, responsible, voting members of the community, they struck back. The redress movement took strong hold of the Japanese American community during the 1970s and 1980s. One California historian states, "their success story is unmatched by any other minority."[<63>](#) The Nisei adhered to their Japanese heritage then more than ever; they had finally learned

to identify with the culture they hated learning about in Crystal City and other camps. The passage of the Civil Liberties Act in 1988 was momentous for the Nisei, for they considered it a tribute to their parents.

Joy Nozaki, whose father threatened to disown her if she did not join him in Crystal City, edited the Reunion Album, and began it with the following dedication:

They measured life's worth in service to others. They were dedicated to a code of duty and obligation that made total demand of themselves. They were selfless, and every sacrifice they made was done as a matter of course. They were the respected leaders of their communities. And because they were all this, they were the prime targets for arrest beginning December 7, 1941. They were our fathers and sometimes mothers.

. . . No, they were not bad, they were good. Not only good, but the very best Issei society could offer. This album is dedicated to them with proud hearts and full appreciation of what they represented.<[64](#)>

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