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Children of Japanese Relocation Camps

By Joyce Furstenau

Caption: Baseball game being played at Manzanar War Relocation Center photographed by Ansel Adams, 1943



On December 7, 1941, everything changed for all Americans, especially those of Japanese descent. On that date, the Japanese army bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

World War II had already begun in Asia in 1937. Two years later, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. These actions split the global community. There were only two sides: the Allies and the Axis powers. The major Axis powers included Japan, Italy, and Germany. The Allies were the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and eventually, the United States. The bombing of Pearl Harbor stunned all Americans. The following day, on December 8, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Japan.

There were about 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast at the time. Fear and mistrust began to take on a life of its own. Agents of the U.S. government came to the doors of Japanese American homes. They were searching for signs of loyalty to Japan. Children sometimes watched as innocent fathers were taken away even though they had committed no crimes.

Children watched their parents bury Japanese books and swords. Families began destroying their Japanese artifacts as word spread about relocation centers. White children were quickly separated from Japanese children at school. Japanese children were frequently called names. Signs were posted on storefronts, "No Japs Allowed."

In February of 1942, the President Roosevelt signed an executive

order to round up all Americans of Japanese ancestry. All 120,000 Japanese Americans were to be sent to "relocation camps." These camps were spread out amongst seven states as well as Canada. The states were California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas.

Once a family received orders to "relocate," they had about seven days to pack their belongings. Each person was allowed to bring only two suitcases. Many children were instructed by their parents to wear as much as they could.

Families sold their businesses, homes, and furniture for pennies on the dollar. Others simply lost their homes and possessions. Pets were not allowed. Children could only watch as strangers took away their family pets.

Life in the relocation camps was difficult. Many of the first camps were constructed on racetracks or fairgrounds. A barbed wire fence surrounded each camp. Soldiers with guns watched from towers. These "relocated" Japanese Americans and their children were all prisoners. They could not leave.

Horse stalls were temporarily offered to the families as their new homes. They were small, dusty, and smelly. The Japanese families did their best to make these stalls into living quarters. There was no running water and no privacy. Many of these "rooms" had only one light bulb. There were no kitchens. People stood in line in large buildings called mess halls for meals. Their food was not prepared in traditional Japanese ways.

When the permanent relocation centers were finished, families had to pack up and move again. Two of them were built in swampland in the state of Arkansas. Two were built in the dry, dusty land of Arizona. Most were built in remote areas.

At first, many rooms had no heat. The barracks were poorly built. The families did their best to make their tiny apartments feel like home.

Schools were started in empty buildings at these camps. Most had no supplies, chairs, or heat. Students brought their own books. Most had to share.

Each day the children said the Pledge of Allegiance. They sang patriotic songs. They celebrated the holidays as best they could. Many families planted gardens. There they grew their own food.



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Children helped with the gardens. If livestock was permitted, the children also helped with these chores, too.

Japanese children found many ways to pass the time. They played baseball, joined the Scouts, watched movies, and made kites. Some camps offered classes in *ikebana*, which is the Japanese art of flower arranging. Everyone tried to keep the hope of freedom alive.

Finally, on December 18, 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the camps were unlawful. The government began allowing Japanese Americans to leave. Many children were excited, but some were scared. Where would they live? Would their friends still call them names? How would they be treated upon their return?

Many families had to find new places to live. Most lost their homes and businesses and had to find new jobs. Some even moved back to Japan. The children and their families had to start over.

In the 1960's, the civil rights movement inspired some young Japanese Americans to begin the "Redress Movement." They wanted the U.S. government to apologize and repay the families \$25,000 for each detainee who was kept in the relocation camps. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act providing \$20,000 for each detainee and a formal apology. President George H. W. Bush issued a second formal apology in 1992 when a second Civil Liberties Act was passed.

The U. S. government has preserved the relocation camp sites as historical landmarks. They are to serve as reminders of our country's failure to protect its citizens against prejudice.

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Questions

- _____ 1. What major event led to the creation of relocation camps?
- A. the bombing of Pearl Harbor
 - B. a demonstration against Japanese citizens
 - C. a parade honoring Japanese citizens
 - D. the death of a Japanese politician
- _____ 2. What U.S. president signed the order to "relocate" the Japanese Americans?
- A. President Franklin D. Roosevelt
 - B. President George H. W. Bush
 - C. President Ronald Reagan
 - D. President Dwight Eisenhower
- _____ 3. How many U.S. states had relocation camps?
- A. fourteen
 - B. five
 - C. seven
 - D. six
- _____ 4. Despite being denied their freedom, the children still recited what at school?
- A. The Constitution
 - B. Japanese language
 - C. The Pledge of Allegiance
 - D. American language
- _____ 5. What is *ikebana*?
- A. a Japanese hat with bananas on it
 - B. a Japanese food made from bananas
 - C. the Japanese art of flower arranging
 - D. a Japanese banana
- _____ 6. In the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, Japanese detainees were given \$20,000 and what else?
- A. a car
 - B. a job
 - C. an apology
 - D. a house