

Sand Memories-A Visit to J-Town

by Kat Avila

It's windy and the wind is cold, I thought as I stepped off the bus at Manzanar.

I hadn't expected that on a late April afternoon in the California desert. And all that sand. There's sand in my shoes, my socks, my hair, and my clothes. After I take a shower, I have to scrub several times between my toes because it feels like sand is still clinging to them. An internee had mentioned that they had sand in their food, bedsheets, áeverything. What would it be like after three years? Would you ever get the memory of sand out of your mind? Or of barbed wire...armed guards...a government and people that locked you up because of your ethnicity, in a state notorious for its anti-Asian history?

Manzanar became a national historic site in 1992. It serves as a resource for the historical interpretation of Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, and resulting in the relocation and imprisonment of over 100,000 ethnic Japanese during World War II. The internment sabotaged years of hard work by the Issei, who came to the United States in the first major waves of immigration from Japan.

Despite being denied the right to become citizens, a right not granted until 1952 over President Truman's veto, and in the face of organized anti-Asian opposition, the Issei built up businesses where "four out of five Japanese in the labor force were employed by Japanese"*. There were also the Nisei, American-born children of the Issei. It was the Nisei who sacrificed themselves on the battlefields of Europe, in the service of the United States and for future generations. The injustice of the internment was acknowledged in a public apology from the U.S. government in 1989.

On the bus, a woman sharing this annual pilgrimage to Manzanar shows me a round tin can a co-worker found in the debris of a leveled Japanese-American convalescent home in Fresno. There are two weathered documents in the can. One is titled "Poston Information Bulletin, Colorado River War Relocation Authority Project, General Instructions." It has a map of the residential area on the back. The other document is a card with the name of a 59-year-old man, Teikitsu Satow. Sato is spelled with a "w." The card has the address of Sato's quarters at the Poston Relocation Center in Arizona.

If Sato were alive today, he would be 117 years old. At this year's pilgrimage, the children of the internment are remembering and speaking out for themselves and their parents. They are already gray-haired elders, and they are outnumbered by students of all ages and ethnicities in attendance. Our elders do not want us to forget.

Browsing the National Resource Center at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, I pull out a large black binder from a five-shelf bookcase of similar binders. This binder holds the memories of those interned at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming. By coincidence, the third page I flip to has a name and face I recognize, that

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of Buddy Takata, a well-known volunteer guide at the museum. Buddy is the same person who led the museum tour I snuck in on two months earlier. That is how I met Ken Honji, the instructor of the East L.A. College Asian Studies class the tour was being given for. Through Ken, I was later apprised of the upcoming Manzanar pilgrimage, and he unselfishly gave up his seat on the bus for me when I told him they weren't taking any more reservations.

Perusing the form Buddy filled out in the binder, I learn our guide was interned at Heart Mountain from Sept. 13, 1942, to July 20, 1945. He lived in Campbell, California, before the internment, and his family returned there after they were released. My museum tour notes say he had been looking forward to graduating high school in June 1942 when his family was told to report to Santa Anita Racetrack that May. They lived in the horse stables there for four months before being sent to Heart Mountain. The message Buddy left in the binder for his fellow Americans reads, "Stop the bashing of all different groups and the scapegoating when things get bad. We are all Americans and there should not be any question about our loyalty."

The next day I visit University of California, Irvine, to look for Ichiro Mike Murase's *LITTLE TOKYO: ONE HUNDRED YEARS IN PICTURES*, a book I ran across at the National Resource Center. I do a double take when I see in the lobby of the library an exhibit called "Legacy of Silence: A Japanese American Story," prompted by donations from poet Mitsuye Yamada of her papers and Christopher Landis of his photographs depicting present-day Manzanar. The exhibit opened in May and closes in October 2000.

Mitsuye was interned at the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho. As they were being transferred from Puyallup Fair Grounds to Minidoka, a Seattle Times photographer took her family's picture. She is smiling broadly. The newspaper ran the caption, "Note smiling faces attesting to good treatment at the camp; a lesson for Tokyo." Mitsuye points out the photographer's collusion in a poem titled simply "Evacuation."

I read in the same display case a newspaper clipping about the Congressional hearings regarding the internment. The man who ran the camps is unrepentant. He says about the use of "internment," "I cannot accept that term. It is a rewriting of history. They were not forcibly interned." Little Tokyo in Los Angeles is an area concentrated between First and Third Street and Los Angeles and Alameda Street. During the years of the internment, it was briefly renamed Bronzeville as African-Americans moved into the vacated area and opened up restaurants and nightclubs. Today Little Tokyo includes the Astronaut Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial, Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC), National Japanese American Veterans Memorial Court, Japanese American National Museum, and David Henry Hwang Theater at the Union Center for the Arts.

During a walking tour of Little Tokyo, the guide, Bill Shishima, points out how Japanese-American history has been preserved in the details around us, such as in a photographic mural, haiku, and tanka wall. There is also the James Irvine Garden where the journey of a "170-foot stream symbolizes the succeeding generations of Japanese in America"**. On First Street, there are stripes running down half of the sidewalk adjacent to the buildings. Each stripe represents a decade; a charcoal-colored band represents the 1940s. I read "1907 Hotel Empire" in a topmost stripe, "1911 Little Tokyo Hotel" in a stripe below that, "1921 Japanese Clinic," and "1946 Sato Hotel" while standing in front of one building. Also imprinted at intervals in the sidewalk are icons of typical Japanese containers used to hold things. The icon of apple pie? That stands for "I'm as American as apple pie," of course.

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History. It's in the people, the buildings, and in the sand. My journey through J-Town began with the Day of Remembrance observations on February 19 at the museum, which spotlighted the forcible removal of Japanese Latinos and their families to the United States to be used as hostages during World War II. There are so many stories that remain to be told. The Japanese-American community's real treasure lies in the courageous caretakers of its history. They are like the great snow-capped mountains of Manzanar, rising above the barbed wire, scrub brush, and sand, that will not be diminished by the antics of foolish humans.

* Little Tokyo, p. 18
** JACCC brochure

FOR FURTHER READING:

1. CONFINEMENT AND ETHNICITY: AN OVERVIEW OF WORLD WAR II JAPANESE AMERICAN RELOCATION SITES, by Jeffery F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, Richard W. Lord, (c) 1999. This free 450-page report is published by the Western Archeological and Conservation Center, 1415 N. Sixth Ave., Tucson, AZ 85705.

2. THE EVACUATION AND RELOCATION OF PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY DURING WORLD WAR II: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE MANZANAR WAR RELOCATION CENTER, 2 volumes, by Harlan D. Unrau, (c) 1996. This resource is provided free to teachers by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Manzanar National Historic Site, P.O. Box 426, Independence, CA 93526-0426.

3. YEARS OF INFAMY: THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICA'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS, by Michi Weglyn, (c) 1976.

Kat Avila at kavila0@sm.ivic.cc.ca.us is always looking for a good story to tell. She is the webmaster/editor of **BUSCANDO CALIFORNIA: An information altar dedicated to Chicano, U.S. Latino, and Cal-Local Theater** (<http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>). Her newest project is **CALIFORNIA TEMPURA: Asian-American theater pages**, at the same web site address.

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