

Japanese American Internment

Roger Shimomura, a Japanese American artist, and his family were interned at a relocation camp during World War II. In the early 1980's, Shimomura created twenty-five paintings in the *Diary* series, based on the diary of his grandmother's experience as an internee at the Minidoka Relocation Center near Hagerman, Idaho. The date of December 12th in the title of the painting refers to an entry in Toku Shimomura's (1888-1968) diary. The entry reads, "I spent all day at home. Starting from today we were permitted to withdraw \$100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's largeheartedness in dealing with us."

The Shimomura family immigrated to the United States in 1912 during the height of twentieth century Japanese immigration from 1900-1920. Immigration presented Japanese citizens with many challenges due to many legal restrictions and frosty relations between the two nations. Once in the United States, Japanese immigrants were subject to racial prejudice and hostility, which only intensified as many Japanese found success and prosperity in their new country. This prejudice manifested into laws which denied Japanese citizenship and barred them from owning property. Their ineligibility for naturalized citizenship stemmed from the **Naturalization Act of 1906**, which allowed only the naturalization of "free white persons," and "persons of African nativity or persons of African descent." The **Asian Exclusion Act of 1924** effectively ended the wave of Japanese immigration because it set quotas for individual countries based on the number of its foreign nationals living in the U.S.

Japan's **attack on Pearl Harbor** resulted not only in the entry of the United States into World War II, but also in the internment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. The attack had brought the long-simmering racial prejudice and hostility against Japanese to the surface, boiling over into mass hysteria. Arrests began as soon as the night of December 7, 1941, when FBI agents, and local and military police took Japanese believed to be spies into custody. By December 11 the number of those taken had reached 1,300. Those detained were community leaders, Shinto and Buddhist priests, newspaper reporters, Japanese language teachers, and any who



Civilian exclusion order #5, posted at First and Front streets, directing removal by April 7 of persons of Japanese ancestry, from the first San Francisco section to be affected by evacuation. Courtesy of the [Library of Congress](#).

had ties to suspected Japanese publications. Actual evidence of criminal or subversive activities was not necessary for arrest or imprisonment, simply suspicion was enough. Internee Margaret Takahasi recalled the anxious environment:

After Pearl Harbor we started to get worried because the newspapers were agitating and printing all those stories all the time. And people were getting angrier. You kept hearing awful rumors. You heard that people were getting their houses burned down and we were afraid that those things might happen to us. My husband worried because he didn't know if people would kick him out of his jobs. You didn't know when the blow was going to fall, or what was going to happen. You didn't quite feel that you could settle down to anything. Your whole future seemed in question. The longer the war dragged on, the worse the feeling got. When the evacuation order finally came I was relieved, Lots of people were relieved, because you were taken care of. You wouldn't have all this worry.

Those Japanese Americans who were detained shortly after Pearl Harbor were mostly of the generation called **Issei** – those who had been born in Japan and moved to the United States. The children of the **Issei**, born in America, were called **Nisei** – automatically American citizens by virtue of their birth in the United States. Chiye Tomihiro, a **Nisei**, believed that her government would protect her, even after her father was arrested and sent to a prison camp:

We used to argue with our parents all the time because we'd say 'Oh, we're American citizens. Uncle Sam's going to take care of us, don't worry.' . . . We were so damn naïve. I don't think any of us ever believed it would happen to us, I think even as we were being hauled away we didn't believe it was happening to us. . . . We were just like in a trance. . . . We were all taught in the history books that our rights were going to be protected and all this other stuff. And I think that the feeling of having been betrayed is the thing that really makes me the saddest of anything.

Mass internment of Japanese Americans did not begin until February 19, 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued **Executive Order 9066** authorizing military authorities to exclude “any and all persons” from designated areas of the country as necessary for national defense. While the order did not explicitly reference Japanese Americans, they were the clear targets of the military order. The law established ten relocation centers in the western part of the country to house Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were native-born. The internment of Japanese Americans was the result of the fear the Japanese would attack the mainland and of longstanding anti-Asian sentiment on the West Coast that began when Chinese labor was imported in the 1850s and that was reflected in the **1924 Immigration Act** specifically excluding

Japanese. Japanese Americans, it was argued, could not be trusted (many German Americans and Italian Americans were also seen as suspect, but not subjected to relocation and internment). Racist wartime propaganda further exacerbated fears of invasion and prejudice against people of Japanese descent. Support for internment also came from local white farmers and businessmen, who assumed possession of most of the internees' property.

Internees were usually not given much advance notice before their departure, leaving little time to pack or sell household goods, or to locate storage for personal possession. They could only take with them what they could carry. Those items that could not be taken to the camps were sold at a fraction of their cost. Family pets were left behind.

The first stop for most internees were one of sixteen assembly centers in Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington State. Public facilities like racetracks and fairgrounds were converted into the assembly centers. The internees remained at these assembly centers until the camps were ready. Roger Shimomura spent his third birthday in the Puyallup Assembly Center on the state fairgrounds near Seattle, where Japanese Americans from Seattle were forced to go in April 1942. These assembly centers were hastily converted, with sanitation, food, and health care facilities well below standard. Many internees had to stay in these centers for months as more permanent camps were constructed. Akiko Mabuchi was sent to the Tanforan Racetrack Assembly center and recalled her new residence, which just a week before had been occupied by a horse:



Arcadia, California. Military police on duty in watch-tower at Santa Anita Park assembly center, 1942, Courtesy of the [National Archives and Records Administration](#)

There were bugs and straw all around and we could see our neighbors through the cracks in the stall and hear conversations in the next stall. We slept on straw mattresses. My father made a big mistake when he tried to wash the floor. The dung beneath the boards smelled to high heaven. The latrines were a culture shock. There were two rows of toilets facing each other with no doors. When one flushed, they all flushed. There was no privacy in the showers either. At first we walked across the racetrack to the grandstand for our first meals. It was canned beans and canned wieners, and more beans and more wieners. Later mess halls were built and staffed by our own cooks and

food got better. For diversion, we mainly hung out in front of the barracks and talked to pass the time away, or played cards. We had nothing to do.



Toku Shimomura with grandson, Roger, circa 1940. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center

In August 1942, Roger Shimomura and his family traveled by train to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho – one of ten relocation camps ran by the **War Relocation Authority** on the West Coast. Conditions varied from camp to camp depending on location – from the heat and dust of the Manzanar camp in California, to the bitter winter cold at the Minidoka camp in Idaho. The one factor that all ten camps had in common was their geographic isolation. Shimomura remembers little from that period, but recalls that adjusting to the harsh Idaho winter was difficult. “I’d never experienced heat like that. I had never experienced wind like that, and the sandstorms. And I never remembered ice like that, and the flooding, how everything just turned into this quagmire. It was all new to me.”

Each camp was like a small city – Minidoka had 9,397 inmates in 1943 and was divided into 35 residential blocks of 12 barracks. The camp had its own hospital and schools as well as shops. Families had small apartments in the barracks. Inmates worked in jobs in the camp and eventually some were allowed to leave camp grounds for work, mostly on nearby farms. Shimomura’s father, Eddie Kazuo Shimomura, a pharmacist, worked at the hospital. Later, the federal government established work-release programs which allowed some inmates to leave the camp to find work in Eastern cities or to attend university.

Most Japanese Americans accepted their internment, fearing reprisals, but a small group, known as the **No-No Boys** resisted. The epithet refers to the protestors’ answering “no” to two questions on the “loyalty questionnaire,” or Leave Clearance Application Form. The questions asked, “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?” and “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any of all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any foreign government, power, or organization?” Japanese internees who had proclaimed themselves loyal began the load road of returning to a normal life, either through the work-release

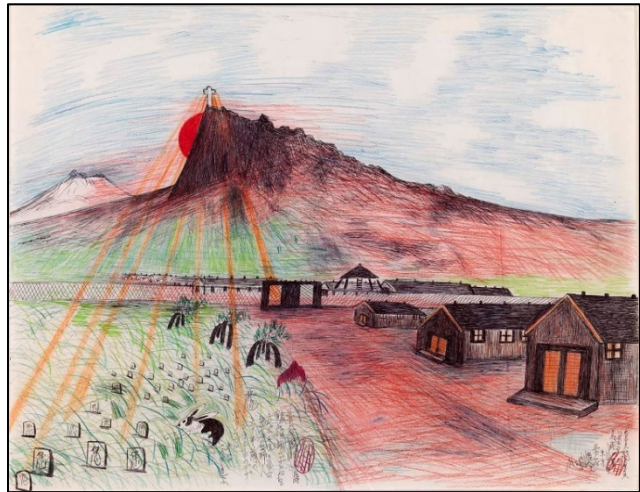
program or through military service. Those who took issue with the loyalty questionnaire were condemned to further isolation, and relocated to the Tule Lake Segregation Center in California.

After the war had ended, the last of the internment camps closed in 1946. Many Japanese-Americans returned to their hometowns, but in the years that they had been interned, many had lost their homes, businesses, and belongings and were forced to rebuild their lives. At the time, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes wrote to President Roosevelt about his objections to the relocation camps, stating that they were “clearly unconstitutional,” and that “the continued retention of these innocent people in the relocation centers would be a blot upon the history of this country.” Ickes elaborated on his position in 1946 after the war had ended:

As a member of President Roosevelt’s administration, I saw the United States Army give way to mass hysteria over the Japanese. . . . It began to round up indiscriminately the Japanese who had been born in Japan, as well as those born here. Crowded into cars like cattle, these hapless people were hurried away to hastily constructed and thoroughly inadequate concentration camps, with soldiers with nervous muskets on guard, in the great American desert. We gave the fancy name of “relocation centers” to these dust bowls, but they were concentration camps nonetheless.

It was not until 1988 when President **Ronald Reagan** signed the **Civil Liberties Act** that the Japanese American community was formally issued an apology and **reparation** payments of \$20,000 were made to each surviving victim. More than 100,000 Americans of Japanese descent were interned during World War II. Internee Margaret Takahashi recalled her internment:

When I think back to the internment, I want to call it a concentration camp, but it wasn’t. We have a neighbor who escaped from Auschwitz during the war, and there’s no comparison. In our life it was only four months, and that’s not long. But the evacuation did change our philosophy. It made you feel that you knew what it was to die, to go somewhere you couldn’t take anything but what you had inside you. And so it



[Cemetery, Tule Lake](#), 2002, Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, Smithsonian American Art Museum

strengthened you. I think from then on we were very strong. In don't think anything could get us down now.

The complacency of the majority of the Japanese Americans in the face of such an affront to their civil liberties astounded most, but internee Akiko Mabuchi explained why she and other of her generation remained so passive in the face of internment. For her, it was not complacency they were displaying, but defiance:

Our generation was raised to never call attention to ourselves, to work twice as hard as others, and above all never to bring shame to the family. We had a strict upbringing. And women, in particular, were never to cause any waves in society. I think it was because our parents were having enough trouble at the time making their way in America and showing their loyalty, they didn't want us to make it harder. So when the war broke out, the only thing we felt we could do was go behind that barbed wire to prove we were loyal. I lost three years of my life and my parents lost everything they had built up over the years. But I sure hope we proved it.

Shimomura still has 37 of the 56 diaries that his grandmother wrote, noting that she burned several of these from the wartime period. Like many Japanese Americans, Shimomura's grandmother Toku burned many diaries in fear that American officials would misconstrue any sentimental references to her homeland as a sign of disloyalty. Some Japanese Americans were imprisoned simply for writing that they missed Japan.

Roger Shimomura has stressed that the most important thing to emphasize to students of history about the relocation camps is what happens when other factors supersede the constitutional rights guaranteed to all Americans citizens – and that the phenomena could happen again. The artist cited the **Iran Hostage Crisis** in 1979 and the events of **September 11, 2001** as examples of when public discussions were held in America about interning Americans of Middle-Eastern descent.

Glossary

1924 Immigration Act: also known as the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924; the act limited the number of immigrants from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were living in the United States at the time of the 1890 census.

Asian Exclusion Act of 1924: also known as the 1924 Immigration Act; the act limited the number of immigrants from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were living in the United States at the time of the 1890 census.

attack on Pearl Harbor: a surprise airstrike by the Japanese on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, which led directly to the United States' entry into World War II.

Civil Liberties Act: the 1988 act signed by President Ronald Reagan which granted reparations to Japanese Americans who had been interned by the United States government during World War II.

Executive Order 9066: signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the order designated certain areas as military zones and authorized the evacuation of all persons deemed a threat to national security to those zones. While not explicitly stated, the order essentially authorized the internment of nearly 120,000 people of Japanese descent during World War II.

Iran Hostage Crisis: a diplomatic crisis between Iran and the United States, where more than sixty Americans were held hostage in Iran for 444 days (from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981).

Issei: a Japanese term meaning "first generation." Used to describe the first Japanese to immigrate to the United States.

Naturalization Act of 1906: signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt, the act limited racial eligibility for citizenship. It also required citizens to learn the English language in order to become naturalized.

Nisei: a Japanese term meaning "second generation." Used to describe the U.S.-born children of Japanese immigrants.

No-No Boys: the colloquial term for detained Japanese Americans who answered "no" to questions 27 and 28 on the so-called "loyalty questionnaire" during World War II. Those who answered no, or who were deemed disloyal, were segregated from other detainees and moved to the Tule Lake Relocation Camp in California.

Ronald Reagan: (1911-2004) 40th President of the United States. He helped to pressure the Soviet Union in ending the Cold War and revitalized the conservative movement in American politics.



reparation: the act or process of making amends for a wrong or injury, often involves monetary compensation.

September 11, 2001: on this day, a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks took place by the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda, targeting symbolic American landmarks.

War Relocation Authority: the government agency in charge of the management of the ten relocation camps that Japanese American were sent to during World War II.