

Manzanar Relocation Camp

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When I asked my mother, "Why are we here, why are we in this prison?" She said simply, "It's because we're Japanese."
Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

The statement above is only one piece among many stories that were apart of Manzanar. On November 15, 2008, YES students from Southern CA Mountain & Desert Area Team spent a full afternoon experiencing an amazing journey at Manzanar Relocation Camp near Lone Pine, CA. There were a lot questions weighing on our minds while we sat in a car for a long ride to Manzanar.

When we arrived to Manzanar one big question was running in our heads, "Where has the building gone?" We saw a board that read "Post Office" but we found nothing there. So, we continued our walk to a museum that showed us life at Manzanar Relocation Camp. Manzanar was one of ten war relocations centers built during World War II to temporarily house Japanese who had been removed from their homes on the West Coast following the signing of Executive Order 9066. Between March of 1942 and November 1945, more than 10,000 men, women, and children lived at Manzanar. Ten war relocation centers were built in the remote desert, plains, and swamps of seven states: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. Manzanar, located in the Owens Valley of California between Sierra Nevada on the west and the Inyo mountains on the east, was typical in many ways of the 10 camps.

The story starts when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This led the United States into World War II and radically changed the lives of 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry living in the United States. The attack intensified racial prejudices and led to fear of potential sabotage and espionage by Japanese Americans among some in the government, military, news media, and public.

We enjoyed hearing the story from Julia Hirosawa Tavel. She was born in Manzanar Relocation Camp in 1942. This what happened with about two-thirds of all Japanese Americans interned at Manzanar, she is also American Citizen by birth. The remainder were aliens, many of whom had lived in the United States for decades, but who, by law, were denied citizenship. Her younger brother was also born at the camp. We also found a few stories about others who lived at Manzanar Relocation Camp. Ms. Graciela Castro, our YES coordinator, asked us to take a small piece of paper that would guide us to find stories on individuals living at the camp. A few storie we found.

1. Joseph Kurihara, Family Number 246

He was a Hawaiian-born Nisei and wanted to join the U.S army in his 40s. They refused him and was accused of being a spy. This was not true. He renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1943 and went to Japan. He never came back to the U.S. At Manzanar, he was associated with Pro-Japan groups.

2. Nikoji Takeuchi, Family number 9096

He arrived at Manzanar as a prisoner. He watched the stars through knotholes in the

ceiling. He decided to build furniture for his mother and sister. After receiving permission to take lumber from a scrap pile, he was shot by a MP. He then recovered in the hospital. Friends and neighbors finished the table and chairs he had set out to make.

When Manzanar Relocation Center closed in 1945, most of the buildings were sold as scrap lumber or moved to private property throughout the Owens Valley. Besides the original sentry posts and auditorium, most of what remains consists of foundations, concrete slabs, and garden features. The national park service adaptively restored the auditorium as an interpretive center with exhibits and a film. Eventually two barracks, a mess hall, a guard tower, and some rock gardens will be reconstructed or restored.

On August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the redress bill. Each former internee alive on that day became eligible for a letter of apology and a one-time payment of \$20,000 from the U.S government.

After more than 3 hours at the camp we went to a fast food restaurant. That day we learned a lot of things: the history of this country, about how people lived at Manzanar, and how Japanese spent their time in a place where they were not supposed to be. Having a good time and sharing our opinion about all these things that happened shows us that today we are still learning. Learning about what happened in the past and to face the future with a brighter dream. Life is all about learning from experience that we get. Life is not always easy, but as long as we try to make it better, there will always be away for you.