

An Ambitious Social Experiment: Education in Japanese-American Internment Camps, 1942-1945

by

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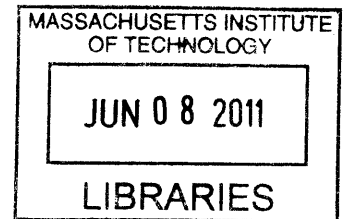
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Educational Programs at Relocation Centers and the Japanese-American Internment

We, who are graduating tonight and all fellow *nisei* and *sansei* are living proofs that the efforts and struggles of our immigrant parents were not in vain. We represent all their labors, their sweat, their sufferings, their tears, their dreams and prayers in this land. We are all they have lived and worked for. And now, now that we have reached young manhood and womanhood, we must individually prove to them that their toils were not in vain, that their faith in us is justified.

Tonight, we are getting more than a diploma. We are getting an opportunity to prove our trust in our country and to justify the faith of our parents. With the past, the American heritage given us by right of birth, and with the past, the enviable past given us by our parents, we must continue their fight and our fight for not only existence but for a glorious future.¹

Alice Nakamura, a senior of the Class of 1943 at Rohwer Center High School in Arkansas, read these words at the conclusion to her graduation speech. Substantively, it sounds like any other reflection on self-identity by a second-generation immigrant. In reality, Alice's speech stands out because it was delivered from a school located behind barbed wire, where the United States government had detained her because of her Japanese ancestry.

Between 1942 and 1945, the United States government removed more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese ancestry residing on the west coast to remote relocation centers located in the barren mountainous states of the American west. Deprived of their freedom, these internees found themselves faced with the challenge of carrying on their everyday lives while surrounded by barbed wire. Parents concerned about the educational prospects of their children pushed for the development of primary and secondary schools, which the administrations provided. Adults seeking to occupy their time after work and alleviate boredom initiated

¹ Alice Nakamura, "Rohwer Center High School Commencement, July 30, 1943," National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 16, Box 378, Folder 64.400.

education programs taught by internees who possessed relevant technical abilities and academic credentials.

Despite the limited freedom and control the internees had over their squalid living conditions, educational programs emerged as one area in which they were able to establish a voice for themselves and collaborate with camp authorities. Due to the wartime shortage of teachers, many young Japanese teachers staffed the primary and secondary schools. The internees completely ran the Adult Education program with only perfunctory oversight from the camp administrations.

In return for this degree of autonomy, the WRA requested the establishment of Americanization classes in all levels of camp schooling. These classes focused on the dissemination of American values and preparation for life after the war. Internees had mixed reactions to these government-mandated requirements but many valuable lessons came out of these classes. Primary and secondary students had an intensely personal experience learning about democracy inside barbed wire. As these students went on to attend colleges and find jobs after internment, they took these experiences with them and crafted new and deeply personal definitions of being an American citizen. The Adult Education programs gave internees English skills and new cultural knowledge that they used in their post-war communities and to communicate with their own children.

Despite the horrid conditions that the Japanese experienced in the internment camps, the education program created relatively positive interactions between the internees and the camp authorities. Although suffering from supply shortages and a high variance in teaching quality, the educational programs challenged internees to think about democracy and what it means to live in America. Japanese internees provided staffing for these programs and worked with the camp

administrators to implementing the curriculums, which allowed a degree of self-governance, an uneasy feat in government-controlled wartime internment centers.

The Japanese-American internment process began on February 19, 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the military to create special areas within the United States from which “any and all” persons may be excluded.² The exclusion order applied to both citizens and aliens, meaning that the government intended to remove both Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans.³ The former are *issei*, a term meaning “first-generation” in Japanese, and the latter are *nisei*, “second-generation.” Throughout the internment process, more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese-ancestry were excluded from the zones of exclusion, often forced to sell their belongings, and relocated to barren camps established in the interior of the United States.

The internment process had no pretenses of kindness – following Pearl Harbor, propaganda posters depicting Japanese as apes and other savage animals were widely distributed, and racist sentiments were openly published and distributed through the press. A selection from a San Francisco newspaper derided the Japanese during the onset of the internment process: “Herd ‘em up, pack ‘em off and give ‘em the inside room in the badlands. [...] Let us have no patience with the enemy or with anyone whose veins carry his blood [...] I hate the Japanese.”⁴ A propaganda poster distributed in 1943 titled, “How to Spot a Jap,” described a Japanese as having “buck teeth” and being unable to smile because he “expect[s] to be shot...and is very unhappy about the whole thing.”⁵ Even Americans from the interior expressed hostility.

² Executive Order 9066, February 19, 1942; National Archives, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Henry McLemore, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*, ed. Lawson Fusao Inada (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 2000), 61.

⁵ Milton Caniff, “How to Spot a Jap,” in *Only What We Could Carry*, 21.

Representative John Rankin from Mississippi, a state that hardly needed to be concerned about Japanese attacks, remarked, “Once a Jap, always a Jap. We cannot afford to trust any of them.”⁶ At the onset of World War II, American culture reeked of hysteria and mania. Americans sought a scapegoat for the loss of American lives by foreign attackers. In this case, public sentiment found the sacrificial lamb in the Japanese-American population. The interned Japanese were loyal American citizens; some had even served in the United States Army during World War I. Others were *issei* Japanese from the *nihonmachi*s (literally “Japanese towns”, or “Little Tokyos,” enclaves within metropolitan areas where the Japanese lived in close-knit communities) of the west coast. Family upon family were uprooted, transported to assembly centers, and then sent for “permanent resettlement” in relocation centers established in the desolate American west.

Japanese immigration to the United States began when Western culture penetrated mainland Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, American entrepreneurs sought Japanese migrant workers as an alternative to Chinese labor. The 1907 “Gentlemen’s Agreement” between the United States and Japan ended the immigration of Japanese laborers to the United States, but permitted the immigration of spouses and children of Japanese laborers already residing in the United States. The 1924 Immigration Act ended almost all immigration from Japan to the United States. During the debates leading up to the 1924 Immigration Act, the publisher of the *Sacramento Bee*, V. S. McClatchy, urged Washington to prohibit the immigration of Japanese women to the United States because they are “urged to beget many children in order that the Yamato race may be

⁶ Thomas James, *Exile Within: The Schooling of Japanese Americans 1942-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 23.



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permanently established on this continent.”⁷ Japanese immigration did not reopen until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Immigration restrictions created a deep generational divide in the Japanese American population by the Second World War. The *issei* comprised individuals who immigrated to the United States prior to 1907, while their *nisei* children were American-born. The Nationality Law of 1790 barred nonwhite immigrants from applying for American citizenship, while the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 granted citizenship to all native-born American residents. This divided the *issei*, who were prevented from applying for American citizenship, from the *nisei*, who enjoyed citizenship by “law of soil.” This division remained until the passage of the 1952 Nationalization Act. The implications of this citizenship gap manifested several times during the internment process.

The Japanese population in the continental United States ballooned sixfold from 24,326 persons in 1900 to 138,834 persons in 1930. Of these, only 18,583 (13.39%) resided outside of the three Pacific states, while the vast majority (86.61%) of the Japanese lived on the west coast.⁸ The Japanese were still a small minority. The 97,456 Japanese who lived in California were only 1.72% of the total population (5,677,251). Japanese lived in all but 9 of California’s 58 counties. A slight majority were citizens of Japan (*issei*) while the *nisei* population was split evenly between those with dual citizenship and American citizens.⁹ The Japanese resided in large metropolitan areas on the west coast – the four largest Japanese settlements in California during 1930 were Los Angeles (21,081), San Francisco (6,250), Sacramento (3,347), and Oakland

⁷ “Must Restrict Entry of Japs.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1922.

⁸ Edward K. Strong, *The Second-Generation Japanese Problem*, (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 271. Data is reprinted from the 1900-1930 United States Census data.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 142. Data is reprinted from the 1930 California State Census data.

provided almost all the fresh vegetables consumed in the city of Los Angeles, and the removal of these farmers threatened the city's wellbeing.¹⁴

The agricultural dominance of the Japanese made the American public uneasy, bringing calls for the regulation of Japanese immigration and their exclusion. Governor Stephens of California pointed out in 1920 that the Japanese had many "admirable qualities," yet raised concerns about the growing control of the Japanese over agriculture. Representative Hayes stated in Congress: "As it is well known, no white man can compete with the Japanese laborers. They are satisfied to be housed in such cramped and squalid quarters as few white men in any part of the world could live in, and the food that keeps them in condition would be too cheap and poor to satisfy the most common labor in this country."¹⁵

Following the attack upon Pearl Harbor, the United States government moved quickly to examine the possibility of Japanese internment. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, repeatedly called for the removal of the Japanese Americans, unabashedly repeating, "A Jap's A Jap" and "it makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not...the west coast is too vital and too vulnerable to take any chances."¹⁶ The mayor of Los Angeles, the city with the largest community of Japanese Americans, went as far as to draw a historical analogy, "If Lincoln were alive today, what would he do...to defend the nation against the Japanese horde...the people born on American soil who have secret loyalty to the Japanese Emperor?" Calling on Congress to move quickly, he urged, "[the] executive in Washington who will save the nation against invasion and destruction will be entitled to a secure place beside Lincoln."¹⁷

¹⁴ "Americans Will Not Work, Says Japanese." *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 1922.

¹⁵ Edward K. Strong, *The Second Generation Japanese Problem*, 127, 131.

¹⁶ "Japs in Coast Area Opposed." *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1943.

¹⁷ "Lincoln Would Intern Japs." *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1942.

As February approached, the rhetoric in Washington became more heated. By February 12, an “irate” California legislator in Congress asserted, “we’re splitting hairs and providing traitors and enemy aliens opportunity to perfect plans that we know have been going right ahead for months.”¹⁸ On February 18, the House reserved \$300,000 from a supply bill for a “Justice Department investigation in California, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Hawaii.” The bill passed unanimously, and Representative Rankin from Mississippi unabashedly echoed General DeWitt, “Once a Jap, always a Jap. You can’t any more regenerate a Jap than you can reverse the laws of nature.” California legislators also threw their weight behind the bill.¹⁹ One day later, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, initiating the process for the removal of all individuals of Japanese ancestry from the western coast.

On the same day, the Justice Department allowed any licensed attorney in the United States to make “spot checks” on the willingness of “enemy aliens” to follow the mandates of the War Department. These checks could be conducted by searching homes and offices. No search warrants were needed because the government denied enemy aliens legal rights. This greatly increased the government’s authority to conduct investigations into the lives of the first-generation Japanese, and curtailed the rights of these individuals by deploying attorneys to police and investigate them. Attorney General Francis Biddle defended this act by arguing that “there is a very strong feeling” on the west coast that the “Japanese situation is dangerous.”²⁰

Numerous editorials focused on securing and defending the mainland United States from Japanese attack.²¹ After the fall of Hong Kong and Singapore to Japanese forces, American strategists began studying the prospects of a Japanese offensive against the American mainland.

¹⁸ “Danger in Delaying Jap Removal Cited,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1942.

¹⁹ “\$300,000 Voted to Probe Japs,” *Washington Post*, February 19, 1942.

²⁰ “Army Given Rule of Japs, Alien or Not,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 1942.

²¹ “To Resist Invasion,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 1942 and “Defense and Security,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 1942.

They were even more concerned about Alaska and Hawaii. United States currency in Hawaii stamped with “HAWAII” in bold black letters to render it useless if the islands fell into enemy hands. A string of Japanese victories in the Pacific Islands brought the threat of Japan invading California into public debate. Once this perceived threat began permeating the media, public support for internment broadened. The County Supervisors Association of California, which met in Sacramento in late February, reported, “the temper of the people of the Pacific Coast has risen to such a point that it is becoming dangerous for loyal enemy aliens to reside in close proximity to the Pacific Ocean” and “it is impossible to know Japanese who are loyal from those who are disloyal.”²² Accounts of FBI agents seizing “American naval signal flags, military uniforms, and an oddly built therapeutic treatment machine capable of sending short distance radio messages” from the Japanese in California fueled suspicion and distrust.²³

Some calls for Japanese internment were also overtly racist. People sent letters to President Roosevelt expressing their concerns. A couple from San Fernando requested that the President remove the “nasty dirty sneekie [sic] people,” and demanded the “ridding [of] our beloved Country of these Japs who hold no love or loyalty to our God, our ideals or our traditions, or our Government.”²⁴ Others objections were merely thinly veiled business concerns. The Western Grower Protective Association, the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association, and the White American Nurserymen of Los Angeles viewed the Japanese internment as a convenient opportunity to exclude Japanese competitors from their markets. The manager of the Grower-Shipper Association went as far as to say, “We’re charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We might as well be honest. We do. It’s a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown man.” Another Californian wrote to the president,

²² “Quick Ousting of Japs From Coast Demanded,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1942.

²³ “6000 Aliens Rounded Up On West Coast,” *Washington Post*, February 23, 1942.

²⁴ Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 91.

complaining that the Japanese “occupy all the best farm ground in California” and that “an American does not stand a chance against them.”²⁵

A series of government declarations tightened the net around Japanese residing on the west coast. Executive Order 9095 created a government office that provided plenary and discretionary authority over alien property assets, a hindrance for individuals being relocated. DeWitt’s General Proclamation No. 3 established a mandatory curfew for people of Japanese ancestry residing in the exclusion areas, and General Proclamation No. 4 on March 27, 1942, banned the Japanese from leaving the exclusion areas altogether until further instructed by the War Department. Beginning on March 24, General DeWitt issued a long series of civilian exclusion orders instructing all people of Japanese ancestry residing in “Military Area No. 1” (including the western areas of Washington, Oregon, California, and parts of Arizona) to report to assembly centers for removal to permanent relocation camps. The War Relocation Authority (WRA), created March 18, 1942 by Executive Order 9102, oversaw the internment process. The Army had earlier and hastily established the Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA) after the signing of Executive Order 9066. Importantly, the government designed WRA to be a civilian organization. Milton S. Eisenhower left the Department of Agriculture to head the new agency.²⁶ This was to reduce the stigma already associated with armed forces removing the Japanese. The government was downplaying the fact that the Japanese were being taken as prisoners of war and spreading the image that Japanese Americans were surrendering themselves to the United States, voluntarily allowing themselves to be locked up as their contribution to the war effort.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 90-92.

²⁶ Ibid., 129-130.

²⁷ Ibid., 92.

The government carried out the process swiftly and abruptly. FBI agents rounded up select individuals and took them away in the middle of the night, but before long, entire families were rounded up. People were ordered to report to assembly points on specific dates, where they took buses and trains to temporary “assembly centers” and then later to permanent “relocation centers.” These relocation centers were essentially large artificial communities carved out of the rugged American west. The official government policy referred to the uprooted Japanese as “residents” of these “relocation camps,” and explicitly forbade the term “concentration camps” to describe these sites as that label was deemed to be too negative.²⁸

Some individuals protested the injustice of the deportation. An iconic photograph depicts a closed Japanese grocery store, with a whitewashed poster spanning the entrance reading in bold print, “I AM AN AMERICAN.” Veterans of Japanese ancestry who served in World War I combat wore their military uniforms with decorations on the day of evacuation as a silent protest. However, following the Japanese custom of forbearance and resilience, many of the affected individuals, especially the *issei*, faced the impending relocation with an air of resigned indifference – *shigata ganai* (“it can’t be helped”) became a catchphrase to describe the prevailing attitude among the older generation.²⁹

During the relocation process, Japanese citizens were repeatedly told that they could bring “only what they could carry.” This stipulation forced the Japanese to sell many of their belongings at extremely cheap prices prior to the reporting deadlines. Some Japanese even went as far to willfully destroy their own belongings, rather than sell them to their neighbors for a

²⁸ Ibid., 131.

²⁹ Ibid., 127.

fraction of their value.³⁰ Although the government offered to manage the property holdings of the Japanese leaving for relocation centers, distrust reduced the viability of this option.³¹

At the assembly points, internees went through a new round of humiliation. Officials searched them for “contraband,” which included transistor radios, communication devices, and cameras. They surrendered personal effects and relinquished their freedom for the immediate years. They learned that they would be spending the next several years of their lives behind barbed wire. Officials assigned them family numbers to replace their family names. Following registration, the internees were put on government transport and moved to assembly centers to await relocation.³²

The establishment of massive relocation centers in the west required significant labor. Advance parties were selected from the assembly centers and sent ahead of the general population to begin construction. Back at the assembly centers, the internees adjusted to life without freedom. The majority of the assembly centers were racetracks or fairgrounds that had been quickly reconstructed. Stables were whitewashed and painted over, while holding stalls were converted into living quarters. Ernest Uno recalled, “The stables just reeked. There was nothing you could do...it still reeked of urine and manure. It was so degrading for people to live in those conditions. It’s almost as if you’re not talking about the way Americans treated Americans.”³³ Communal washing areas provided for the internees’ hygienic needs, while food

³⁰ Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar: A True Story of Japanese American Experience During and After the World War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 12-13.

³¹ Ben Iijima, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 4-5. Evacuation instructions of the various Exclusion Orders issued by the Headquarters of the Western Defense Command Fourth Army headed by General DeWitt offered United States Government safekeeping of large furniture items (see Civilian Exclusion Order No. 5, bullet point 3 (evacuation of San Francisco City) and Civilian Exclusion Order No. 34, bullet point 5 (evacuation of Alameda County) for examples).

³² Yamato Ichihashi, *Morning Glory, Evening Shadow: Yamato Ichihashi and His Internment Writings, 1942-1945*, ed. Gordon H. Chang (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 101-03; Toyo Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 22-27.

³³ Ernest Uno, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 70.

came from large communal mess halls in which the internee population served as cooks and labor. Quite often, the food was tasteless and unappetizing. An internee at Tanforan Assembly Center recalls: “when I reached the serving table and held out my plate, a cook reached into a dishpan full of canned sausages and dropped two onto my plate with his fingers. Another man gave me a boiled potato and a piece of butterless bread.”³⁴

Despite the terrible conditions, community members began organizing schools for children in the assembly centers. These schools were bereft of basic supplies and equipment, rudimentary and poorly organized. A group of recent Bay Area college graduates established the first teaching program at the Tanforan Assembly Center. A meager teaching staff of five women and seven men prepared handwritten instruction materials and held classes in the open air of the racetrack grandstands.³⁵ At Santa Anita Assembly Center, internees with educational backgrounds, including a professor of history at Stanford University, created a basic school system that enrolled 1,774 pupils. The challenges were numerous – aside from the nonexistent classrooms and teaching materials, students were also extremely rowdy and difficult to control. An organizer of the Santa Anita grade school observed, “Most of the youngsters in or out of the school have succumbed to the idea that they are on a vacation or a perpetual picnic, and we have no means to control them.”³⁶ Although these makeshift schools were ineffective, they mobilized the *nisei* to engage the WRA in dialogue and prepared them for the government curriculum that was later imposed upon them at the relocation centers. Educators quickly recognized the challenges present in establishing a schooling system for internees and sought to anticipate these issues in the permanent WRA schools.

³⁴ Yoshiko Uchida quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 72.

³⁵ Toyo Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance*, 51-54.

³⁶ Yamato Ichihashi, *Morning Glory, Evening Shadow*, 130.

Relocation centers were completed between March and October 1942. Transports carried the internee population from temporary holding in the assembly centers to the relocation camps. The journey to the interior was arduous. Riding in cattle cars or being packed in military transport trains took a toll on many of the internees. Illustrator Mine Okubo, who was interned at Topaz Relocation Center, described the journey from Tanforan to Topaz using a combination of prose and art: “Many became train sick and vomited. The children cried from restlessness. At one point on the way, a brick was thrown into one of the cars.” The journey took three days and two nights, and Okubo’s illustrations vividly depict overcrowded trains and exhausted internees curled up on chairs in the stuffy, crowded train compartments.³⁷

Residences in the relocation center were military-style barracks with bare furnishings. Internees fashioned furniture out of salvaged lumber and plugged holes in walls and roofs with whatever they could find. Using military blankets, families divided the barracks into living units designated by English letters. An internee humorously commented on the nonexistent room divisions: “Walls in Camp II housing were as thin as paper and riddled with holes that seemed to refuse to stay plugged. Some young couples found that this lack of privacy cramped their bedroom style. Others didn’t give a damn and put on first-rate demonstrations for kids who made an enthusiastic audience.”³⁸ Each barrack often accommodated several families, and “there is no privacy of any kind” for conversation or interaction in the entire barrack.³⁹ Over time, families decorated their living quarters with ornaments fashioned from whatever was available. In the latter years, they purchased items by mail or received gifts from friends, and the camp environment gradually acquired a less stark presentation.

³⁷ Mine Okubo, *Citizen 13660* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1983), 117.

³⁸ Jack Matsuoka, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 225.

³⁹ Yamato Ichihashi, *Morning Glory, Evening Shadow*, 108.

The centers were surrounded by barbed wire. Sentry towers manned by soldiers with machine guns pointed inward overlooked the camps. The sentry towers quickly became a symbol of infamy, as thousands of interned Japanese could not possibly comprehend why they were being guarded under threat of force, when they had never picked up firearms in their lives. A supervisory force comprised of soldiers under the authority of the WRA maintained camp security, although the WRA allowed for civic government among the internees. For the most part, each block elected leaders who managed internal conflicts before they reached the camp administrators. Camp amenities and public services varied by location, although every camp had three programs: sports, religion, and education.⁴⁰

Sports, particularly baseball, united camp residents from the adults to the adolescents, and provided a convenient outlet for emotions as the internment period dragged on. Camp newspapers devoted entire sections to tallying sport scores, and community teams sometimes played against teams from outside of the camps. The camp high school and adult teams often commanded a following of internees who tracked their games religiously. Tournaments were common. Topaz residents organized themselves into Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western block leagues, and the camp newspapers heralded the accomplishments of star players using the play-by-play language of professional baseball commentators.⁴¹

Religious life flourished in the internment camps, as Buddhist teachers, Shinto priests, and Christian pastors conducted their services alongside each other on Sundays. Sermons were

⁴⁰ Reporting from the camp-published newspapers provides insights into the importance of these activities in the camps. For example, the *Topaz Times*, *Manzanar Free Press*, and *Heart Mountain Sentinel* are three examples where the sporting, religious, and educational activities of the centers were documented carefully on a weekly basis through the period of internment. Newspapers from other camps also contained the same kind of reporting, but to varying degrees of consistency.

⁴¹ At Topaz, one of the earliest games dates from mid-November 1942, when the “Men-Over-50-Years” played a game against the “Girls All Stars” (*Topaz Times*, November 12, 1942). This game commanded an audience of over 500 spectators, demonstrating the popularity of the match. In addition to the adult matches, the primary and secondary schools also established teams and played against local high school teams that traveled to the camps.

given in both English and Japanese in the school barracks and dining halls. The numerous services and Sunday school programs meant the different religious gatherings often ran concurrently, and the same meeting space could accommodate a variety of programs from different faiths on the same day. Extensive portions of the camp newspapers were dedicated to church bulletins, and before long, the newspapers also started carrying excerpts and portions from sermons and religious teachings for the benefit of the community.⁴²

Finally, education was an essential central component of life at all relocation camps. Education had been a foremost concern to *issei* parents, who saw it as a path for the social advancement of their children. Many of the first-generation Japanese held advanced degrees in Japan, but were relegated to working menial jobs in the United States due to language and social barriers. Although some *issei* were skeptical about the social fates of their second-generation children in America, the majority still encouraged their children to seek out the best possible educational opportunities. Toyo Suyemoto, a *nisei* internee who would later play an active role in shaping English education at Topaz Relocation Center, recalled:

Mother would say she had given us a sound mind and kept our bodies properly nourished, so we should not shirk our responsibility to study hard and earn top grades. A grade below an A was not acceptable. Mother would question us closely when we failed her expectations. She did not accept excuses, and at times when we made vehement explanations as to why the grades were not topnotch, she would calmly look at us and quietly ask, “Have you stopped to look to yourself as to why you have not done better?”⁴³

Other *nisei* took responsibility for their own learning. One student commented, “Why do I want to go to college? Because I don’t want to get stuck on the farm. I don’t want to spend my life in stoop labor like my folks.” Some *issei* goaded their young children on, stating: “If I could

⁴² At Topaz, regular space dedicated to church news and sermons began on the fifth edition of the *Topaz Times*, October 31, 1942. The *Manzanar Free Press* published church gathering times as early as the first edition on April 11, 1942. Similarly, the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* started publishing church news on October 24, 1942.

⁴³ Toyo Suyemoto, “Another Spring,” in *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, ed. Erica Harth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 27.

only speak English like you, I would have amounted to something.”⁴⁴ A combination of parental expectations and personal ambition motivated the *nisei* youngsters, and they approached their studies with vigor. One superintendent observed, “a [Japanese] child of six pursues his studies with the intensity of an American youth working his way through college; and the constant struggle of the public schools is not to compel the Japanese to attend, but to keep out youngsters below school-age who resort to all manner of subterfuge in order to gain entrance.”⁴⁵

Prior to the internment, Japanese students enrolled in Los Angeles high schools during the 1927-1928 school year did exceptionally well. Japanese students outperformed their peers at earning A and B grades, and were also significantly less likely to receive D and E grades. Japanese-American students in grade 9, for example, distinguished themselves from their peers, with 74% earning A and B marks, while only 37% of non-Japanese earned such grades. Additionally, a mere 5% of these Japanese-American students earned D marks, and none earned an E mark. A total of 31% of non-Japanese students received unsatisfactory grades. Similar successes were demonstrated across all secondary school grade levels, indicating that outstanding performance was consistent across all of high school. Japanese students outperformed their peers in every academic subject, except German, and even then the difference was statistically insignificant. The gap was notably narrower in literature and humanities classes, although this can be attributed to unfamiliarity of English and the challenge of communicating in two languages.⁴⁶

Doing well in school meant living up to parental expectations and fulfilling one’s obligations as a dutiful son or daughter. A *nisei* remembers, “I studied hard because I felt it was the thing to do. It was important to succeed in school. I enjoyed seeing those A’s on my report

⁴⁴ Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), 161.

⁴⁵ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 13.

⁴⁶ Edward K. Strong, *The Second-Generation Japanese Problem*, 189-196.

card, but a big part of the pleasure came in seeing how pleased my parents were. I guess you might say I worked for good grades because it made my parents happy.”⁴⁷ Japanese parents also did things by the virtue of *kodomo tame ni* – for the sake of the children. Parents will go out of their way to sacrifice for the advancement of their children, but, in a similar vein, expect the best of their children. Combined with the students’ own ambitions and desire to live up to expectations, these societal values drove the Japanese students to perform well in American schools.⁴⁸

As a result, educational programs developed out of the initiative and leadership of *nisei* students cognizant of the need for organized classes at the assembly centers. At Tanforan Assembly Center, parents were “troubled” by the interruption in their children’s education following deportation, and college-educated *nisei* took the initiative to establish educational programs. “The parents were very pleased by our undertaking, and when I would meet any of them in the mess hall, they would express their deep appreciation for our efforts,” a *nisei* teacher remembered.⁴⁹ These classes caught the attention of the WRA administrators, and by the time the internees moved to permanent relocation centers, the WRA formed education departments that oversaw and governed primary and secondary schooling. The regulation of adult education remained very much camp-driven and initiated by internees, although the WRA supervised programs once they began and encouraged Americanization and English instruction.⁵⁰

Education stands out among other relocation center activities for several reasons. Japanese internment created an occasion where an entire ethnic population lived under the jurisdiction of another group, where the governing body established mandates on overall

⁴⁷ Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei*, 161.

⁴⁸ Mitsuye Yamada, “Legacy of Silence (I),” in *Last Witnesses*, 36.

⁴⁹ Toyo Suyemoto “Another Spring,” in *Last Witnesses*, 28.

⁵⁰ War Relocation Authority, “Administrative Notice No. 125,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

administration, community life, and, of course, education. With more than one hundred thousand interned Japanese in the camps, the American government had a perfect opportunity to conduct an ambitious and creative social experiment. The global aims and the local implementation of WRA educational policy were often quite different. Washington gave orders and designed the overarching educational framework and structure, but largely left the implementation of educational activities to the interpretation of center supervisors and educational directors. As such, the ten relocation centers had varied success in their educational programs and varied educational structures.

Most importantly, however, the history of education at the relocation centers provides a vivid example of internee self-determination in the face of restrictions on their freedom. Although deprived of the ability to keep their jobs, to reside in their homes, and to pursue their ambitions for several years, the interned population expressed their repressed desires and ambitions in the educational systems of the relocation centers. Notably, then, the WRA-mandated primary and secondary programs were not rigid, inflexible government curriculums but works-in-progress that underwent lots of revision and innovation. Internee input and feedback helped adjust the official policy to one that fit the needs of particular centers. Parents and students drew from their own cultural experiences and integrated this material into the programs. Adults offered the skills of their trades to fellow internees, and this talent exchange gave rise to adult education programs.

The English author G. K. Chesterton wrote, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” In the Japanese relocation centers, the *issei* and *nisei* worked together to transmit knowledge to the younger generations. The youngsters were forced to assess the complexities of wartime internment and personal loyalty to the United States,

contributing to a unique and complex educational experience. Many of these students went on to college across the United States following internment, bringing with them the instruction and lessons from camp life that they gleaned at the internment centers. Some served as ambassadors of goodwill to assist the post-WWII general public in learning more about Japanese Americans. Others grappled with the inherent contradictions in studying democracy while under armed guard. Regardless of the outcome, these intensely personal lessons in democracy challenged students to think deeply about what it means to be an American citizen. For the adults, many put the skills and abilities learned through the adult education program into practice following internment, such as their newly acquired English knowledge. Education at the relocation centers continued to have a long-lasting effect in post-WWII Japanese-American social history, persisting long after the wooden barracks in the American interior had been torn down.

CHAPTER 2

Educating “Projectiles of Democracy”: Americanization Objectives Under the Community School Models of Primary and Secondary Schools

Even as General DeWitt implemented evacuation orders and the government constructed relocation centers, it became clear that these new communities would not operate in isolation. At the assembly centers, internee-led educational programs had sprung up, and the states in which relocation centers were located mandated education for children under the age of 16. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) introduced a system of education known as the “community school,” an innovative program for primary and secondary schools suggested by educators at Stanford University. The WRA saw the internment of a near-complete cross-section of young Japanese students as a valuable opportunity to educate “projectiles of democracy” in anticipation of widespread Japanese resettlement after internment. As interned teenagers and children attempted to adjust to a novel educational system that linked classroom lessons with elements from everyday life, they also struggled with the implications of democracy behind barbed wire.

The WRA early recognized the need for formal education programs in the relocation centers, and sought to address this issue while replacing the rudimentary educational system that Japanese parents organized in the assembly centers. Over the next three years, primary and secondary schools opened at every WRA relocation center, based on a model proposed by Stanford University and state school boards. The Stanford University plan integrated the school curriculum into life in the camps through a “community school” model. Instructional classes taught in the camps had to be accredited by school boards in the states where the camps were located. Classes such as English and mathematics had to conform to state standards; a high school degree from the camp school would be equivalent to those issued by any other high

schools in that state. The WRA laid out a set of guidelines for the educational programs, but left the interpretation and execution of the educational programs largely to the project directors and the educational directors appointed at each of the relocation centers. A hodge-podge of educational systems emerged, with mixed results and uneven administration. Nonetheless, the educational system at relocation centers deeply affected an entire generation of Japanese Americans (the *nisei*) and influenced the way they viewed their post-internment lives. The quantity of WRA notes and documents on curriculum planning indicates that the agency viewed education as a key means of indoctrinating young Japanese Americans and instilling democratic values.

In July of 1942, staff members from the WRA San Francisco Regional Office met with the graduate class of Curriculum Development at Stanford University Summer Session, and attempted to sketch out a rough outline of a curriculum to be used at the relocation centers. The Stanford students visited Tule Lake to get a more accurate picture of an operating relocation center while constructing the curriculum guide. Finally, fifteen WRA officials from various relocation centers met at Stanford where they collaborated on curricular recommendations for the relocation schools. The curriculum guide was published at the end of the summer and distributed to the educational departments at the various relocation centers.⁵¹

The WRA published “A Summary Report on the WRA Educational Program” on March 1, 1944. At this point, the relocation center schools had been established and programs had been developed in the camp schools. This report summarized the history of WRA education in the relocation center, objectives of the program, and difficulties encountered in establishing the schools.

⁵¹ Stanford University, “Proposed Curriculum Procedures for Japanese Relocation Centers,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 4, “To the Reader.”

According to the document, the WRA viewed the educational program as serving three important goals: to provide an education similar to that found in mainstream American schools, to prepare students for integration into American communities after internment, and to arouse “new hopes” and develop “new ambitions...to serve as incentives to future planning” in response to the “attitude of resignation and an apathy toward the future” caused by prolonged internment. Administrators also hoped to meet Japanese parents’ demands and expectations for educating their children. The WRA saw the educational programs as having an immediate positive role in alleviating boredom or cynicism (combating resignation and apathy) and instilling American values to the younger generation. These students would have to reintegrate into non-Japanese communities after the war.⁵²

The concept of the “community school” framed education for primary and secondary students. Beginning on November 20, 1942, the San Francisco Regional Office began publishing a series of newsletters titled “Community School Forum” to be distributed to school personnel in War Relocation Centers. These newsletters elaborated the WRA’s aims.⁵³

As defined by the WRA, the community school “recognizes that even the young child is a responsible member of society, and that his maturing responsibilities require understanding of the organization and motive forces of his community, and a share in working out plans for its improvement.”⁵⁴ The educational curriculum was closely tied to daily life, and emphasis was placed on establishing links and creating connections between classroom learning and community participation. This model of education was unique to the relocation camps, as the internees formed a close-knit, insular society, and, as such, a distinct model of education was

⁵² War Relocation Authority, “A Summary Report on the WRA Educational Program,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1, “Revised Manual and Handbook Materials” Folder.

⁵³ War Relocation Authority, San Francisco Regional Office, “Community School Forum, Vol. 1, No. 1,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

needed to penetrate into camp life. This model of education created a stronger link between the community and the schools than mainstream American schools. This unique integration stemmed in part from a curriculum design recommended by Stanford University in the summer of 1942.

The close parallel in language between the Stanford report and official reports and summaries of WRA educational objectives and goals suggest that the compiled booklet formed the foundation of educational planning at the relocation centers. The Stanford report served as the original source of the concept of the “community school” propagated by the WRA as a model for its educational system. To illustrate the concept of a “community school,” Stanford used the image of a potential fire at a relocation center.⁵⁵ The buildings in the internment centers were created out of wood and tarpaper and the entire camp posed a fire risk. The lack of dedicated firemen and limited water supplies at each center required that all members of the community pitch in to prevent fires. An effective community school, in this case, would recognize this problem and act to reduce the threat of fire through education on prevention, fighting fires, and first aid. The “community school” model places a direct focus on the needs of the community, and seeks to integrate instruction into the daily lives of the students and their families.

This educational model was far from new. The report noted that it had been successful for nearly a hundred years in Denmark, and a similar project “has been used by leaders in Mexico to effect in a decade progress which would ordinarily require generations in time.”⁵⁶ The curriculum echoed John Dewey’s goal of giving a child “an orderly sense of the world in which he lives.”⁵⁷ To demonstrate this claim, the report uses actual examples of how the community school will function in the context of the camp.

⁵⁵ Ibid., II-1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., II-4.

⁵⁷ Erica Harth, “Democracy for Beginners,” in *Last Witnesses*, 193.

The suggestions and objectives corresponded to eight governing divisions already existing at the camps: production, public works, community services, transportation, maintenance, community enterprise, labor relations, and administration. The organizers saw two functions in each division: one in which the school population can provide a vital service to the community and another in which the community can offer opportunities and training to the school. In examining the community-school relationship, it appears that the community often offered practical supplements to the material presented in the classroom. Visits to the project farm could help students learning about plant growth, for example. Students assisting with the mess hall and camp dining hall could also acquire practical math skills. On the other hand, the schools offered training to individuals who could give back to their community. Vocational training such as carpentry and home economics at school would equip students to work in camp facilities. English instruction in the schools could facilitate communication between the internees and the camp administration. In this way, the camp schools and the community are intertwined in theory and in practice.

These eight areas are also carried over as a model for all levels of primary and secondary education. For instance, in the draft curriculum of the Stanford report, first graders are challenged to consider “how can the yard at school be made more useful and beautiful?”⁵⁸ At the seventh grade level, the question becomes, “What does the community do to make more attractive living conditions for its people?”⁵⁹ Finally, high school students at the eleventh grade are asked, “What conservation projects would benefit our community and region?”⁶⁰ The same focus on the community goes through three stages of evolution as the student progresses through the schooling system – from the yard in the school to the living conditions at the camp, and then

⁵⁸ Stanford University, “Proposed Curriculum,” IV-7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., IV-9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., IV-10.

finally to conservation projects on a regional level. This kind of small picture to big picture thinking is a central element of the community-based learning, as students are challenged to broaden their definition of “community” as they progress through the educational curriculum.

Although the WRA “community school” model was designed with good intentions, the implementation of the program was met with mixed responses. Many teachers protested the integration of experimental educational theories into camp education programs, a traditional approach that they had been using for years. One educator commented, “We don’t want John Dewey – went in over my head and never did emerge.”⁶¹ Parents also feared that the new schooling system would be uncompetitive compared to standard state-mandated curriculums, and often openly made their sentiments known to the teachers and the camp administrators. As a result, the level of implementation of the WRA curriculum varied across camps. Some faithfully attempted to reproduce the community model into secondary and primary education, while others remained stubbornly committed to the traditional state curriculums. Most educational programs ended up becoming a combination of both.⁶²

Uniquely, all camp curriculums had an important embedded agenda. The government emphasized Americanization instruction in the camp schools. The primary and secondary education programs emphasized the assimilation of Japanese students into “American” ideology and values. The result was a modified curriculum with extensive “Americanization” guidelines established for primary and secondary schools. The 1944 WRA handbook summarized educational objectives for encouraging contemplation about relocation and Americanization, and was disseminated to the education departments of the relocation centers. The WRA recognized the need for the interned community to “make a satisfactory adjustment in the outside world”

⁶¹ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 56.

following internment. As a result, the WRA established specific goals in secondary and primary education to “teach the *nisei* to take pride in American history and culture, which their parents embraced upon original entry into the country,” “teach those that are afraid that their oriental faces will be a complete handicap to them,” and “educate for acceptance for and adjustment to change...teach individuals and groups to face reality.”⁶³

The WRA had twin goals when it came to educating Japanese children – to teach them about relocation and to make them better American citizens. The two goals were intrinsically linked. If the student was a “better American” then he or she would be more likely to embrace the idea of moving out of the relocation center into the American mainstream. Relocation was the ultimate aim of internment. WRA Director Dillon S. Myer commented in 1945 that, “these children are not going to school, I hope, with the idea of learning how to live in relocation centers all their lives.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, the WRA stressed relocation and Americanization in the elementary and secondary curriculums, even though these students were not making the family decisions about relocation after internment. A sample play included in the Education portion of the WRA Handbook, allegedly written by “some sixth grade children,” illustrates this idea.⁶⁵

The play opens with Mrs. Yamaguchi and Mrs. Matsumoto speaking at a relocation center, with Yamaguchi asking Matsumoto whether she had plans for relocation. Mrs. Matsumoto adamantly objects, fearing housing shortages, job shortages, and hostility from the outside community. The children of the two women arrive back from school, and cheerily ask whether the two families will be permitted to relocate together. Mrs. Matsumoto begins by stating firmly that there are no plans for relocation, but persistent comments from the children

⁶³ War Relocation Authority, “Education 30.3, Objective III: Americanization,” National Archives, *WRA Handbook*, Record Group 210, Box 31, Entry 1.

⁶⁴ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 113.

⁶⁵ War Relocation Authority, “Education 30.3, Objective III: Americanization,” National Archives, *WRA Handbook*, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

persuade her to consult the camp director about this issue. The director, Mr. Moulton, assures Mrs. Matsumoto of the positive benefits of relocation, and Mrs. Matsumoto is quickly convinced. The play closes with the Yamaguchi and Matsumoto families relocating jointly to Clinton, Iowa.⁶⁶

This short script is intriguing in several ways. First, it documents the objections and fears that the WRA believed the internees possessed about relocation. Second, it reinforces the cheery image of relocation and Americanization that the camp authorities had attempted to propagate from the onset. Third, it highlights the role that the children were expected to play in influencing and convincing their parents to be more “open” to American ideas and confident in interacting with Americans.

Relocation gave the WRA a chance to help the Japanese fit into mainstream American society and reverse negative images of the Japanese in the American mind. Relocation was frequently portrayed in a very positive light to entice the Japanese to look forward to life after the camps. Addressing the fears about moving and living outside of Japanese communities, the camp director insisted, “people will get to know you [after Relocation] and your ways which they will find aren’t very much different from their ways.” The script also contained WRA strategies and plans for Japanese relocation. For example, when Mrs. Yamaguchi is discussing her future with Mrs. Matsumoto, she points out, “we decided against [relocating to Chicago] because so many people have already relocated out there. It is not very good to have the Japanese settle in one place. We should spread out to all states and different towns and cities and give a chance to the Caucasians to study and get to know us better.”⁶⁷ This was government policy, and it is curious that it so easily found its way into a “student produced” script at school. Relocation

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

was an essential aspect of the curriculum, and administrators hoped that repeatedly introducing it to children would push it into their homes and propagate WRA aims. The extent of the efforts to develop American pride and embrace relocation is also evident in the curricular objectives, which are summarized also in the WRA handbooks.⁶⁸

In the elementary curriculum, the administration suggested that pupils “take imaginary trips on different railroad lines visiting friends who have relocated” and “write stories about the places to which they want to relocate.” For secondary students, the curriculum called for “interviews with relocation officers” and for students to “make graphs and pictographs depicting relocation data.” In particular, Exhibit IX of the WRA Education Handbook presented an entire curriculum on the “Relocation Unit” for use in camp high schools and adult education programs. The detailed guide outlined the entire process of relocation, beginning with travel out of the relocation center to arrival at the intended destination, securing employment, and purchasing insurance and managing finances.⁶⁹

The guide clearly portrayed the WRA as intending to help the Japanese make a smooth transition to post-internment life. For instance, the manual coaches teachers to instruct the Japanese to deal with deriding comments such as “We don’t want any Japs!” when seeking employment with the eloquent response:

Neither do I. I am an American. I chose this country to live in and work in because I like it better than any other country. I’m out here ready to do my best when manpower is needed and everybody ought to be working hard together, and not fighting each other. How about giving your support to democracy by working together, now, for a better world? I’m willing to do that. Can you afford to do any less?⁷⁰

⁶⁸ War Relocation Authority, “Education 30.3,” National Archives, *WRA Handbook*, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In addition to instructing internees about post-relocation life, the manual exhorts them to serve as ambassadors of goodwill to reverse misunderstandings and racial prejudice stemming from ignorance and fear. Internees are instructed to “present a well-balanced picture of the whole evacuee situation” and “emphasize the need for democracy and racial equality throughout the world and the United States.” Additionally, the Japanese should join church groups, to “show [the white Americans] that [they] are an able person and that [they] are as just as American as they and their parents.” Finally, classes on table etiquette, dress, and general manners are suggested, as well as steps to improve English ability and communication skills to accelerate integration and assimilation.⁷¹

Student performance in this curriculum was assessed by a combination of reading comprehension exams, personal essays, and analysis of magazine and newspaper articles relating to relocation. For instance, students were encouraged to read selections from *Canterbury Tales* and *Macbeth* to improve English understanding. A brief statistical note at the end of the curriculum records for Poston indicates that nineteen of the twenty-six pupils in the class applied for employment or education. The program directors were interested in links between this innovative curriculum and internees’ demonstrated desire for relocation. There always existed a utilitarian component to educational activities and the curriculum for primary and secondary schools in the relocation centers. The “community school” ideal championed by the WRA further supports this observation.⁷²

Students reacted to these educational opportunities with a mix of emotions. Although the students generally recognized the efforts of the majority of the teaching staff, their view of the condition and state of the camp schools was overwhelmingly negative. A student at Minidoka

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

commented that the school's "furniture...material...textbooks" were "sparse."⁷³ At Minidoka and all other relocation centers, schools were situated in barracks, and supplies were often donated from around the country.⁷⁴ In the face of a severe shortage of equipment, chemistry experiments were performed in non-laboratory rooms with little regard for safety. In one particular experiment, a teacher tossed pieces of sodium metal directly into a vat of water, creating explosions. At the goading of the students, he increased the size of the pieces of sodium metal, until sodium hydroxide solution was flying around the room and landing on students not wearing any safety equipment.⁷⁵ Some students also disliked the interdisciplinary design of the community school system and believed that this approach held them back in college admissions: "what in the world is the use of learning about 'Your Community?'"⁷⁶

The WRA drew the staffs of the primary and secondary programs from the internee population and also recruited Caucasian teachers. Initially, it had been proposed that the internees fill the teaching positions, but this idea proved to be unfeasible given the WRA's desire to control the curriculum.⁷⁷ The teachers drawn from the camp populations were often student teachers who had just received their education degrees or were completing degrees when the internment order was issued. These teachers benefitted from their language skills, since Japanese was used freely among the *nisei* students. The Caucasian teachers were drawn from all over the country, attracted to WRA job postings. Due to the nationwide shortage of teachers during the war, many poorly qualified teachers were hired by the WRA and the quality of education

⁷³ Densho Archives (The Japanese American Legacy Project), "Marion Tsutakawa Kanemoto Interview Segment 26," ID: denshovh-kmarion-01-0026. Densho Archives may be accessed via www.densho.org/archive. Last accessed May 2011.

⁷⁴ Densho Archives, "Martha Shoaf Interview Segment 13," ID: denshovh-smartha-01-0013.

⁷⁵ Densho Archives, "Bob Utsumi Interview Segment 13," ID: denshovh-ubob-01-0013.

⁷⁶ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

suffered.⁷⁸ Additionally, Caucasian teachers had a language barrier. Significantly, Caucasian teachers enjoyed better living quarters than the interned Japanese.⁷⁹ Despite this, many teachers left in frustration and were often replaced by internees drafted to fill the gaps.

A former student at the Topaz elementary school remembered a Caucasian teacher whose grammar was so poor that students were constantly correcting her and interrupting her in class, which caused her to finally leave in embarrassment. Additionally, the constant classroom chatter in Japanese caused a Caucasian teacher to walk out exclaiming, “my father said, ‘Don’t deal with the scum,’ and I won’t.” The situation was remedied when Japanese teachers drawn from the camp took control of the school. When the students rebelled, one Japanese teacher used her greater clout with the parents to get the class to settle down.⁸⁰

Many Caucasian teachers did their best despite the chaos and confusion that dominated the camp schooling system. A teacher at Topaz, attracted to the challenging opportunity of working in a Japanese-American internment camp, braved the harsh Utah weather and the drab conditions of the camp for a chance to teach.⁸¹ Other teachers faced animosity and contempt from neighbors and friends after announcing their intent to teach in the Japanese-American camp schools, but went anyway.⁸² A Caucasian teacher was touched by the letter of one of her former *nisei* students who she taught prior to the war: “What [this war] will eventually do to [the *nisei* students in the camps] I don’t know, but I do know that it is a truly discouraging situation which can be remedied only through an honest-to-goodness sympathetic effort on the part of those

⁷⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁰ Densho Archives, “Helen Harano Christ Interview Segment 13,” ID: denshovh-chelen-01-0013.

⁸¹ Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, “A Teacher at Topaz,” in *Only What We Could Carry*, 128.

⁸² Densho Archives, “Robert Coombs Interview Segment 13,” ID: denshovh-crobert-01-0013.

whom they are able to respect as elders and as teachers.” The recipient of this letter, Edythe Backus, volunteered to teach at the camps shortly afterwards.⁸³

Although these dedicated teachers were apparently in short supply, some students truly appreciated their efforts. In the minds of the former students, teachers who asked students to look ahead – beyond their current situation in the internment camps – were especially memorable, as these teachers refused to “give up” on students who may have already given up on themselves under the pressure of racial animosity that they experienced during the course of the war.⁸⁴ Other students recalled that certain teachers were not scared to draw a firm line between themselves and the camp administrators. In one instance, when the administrators asked the Caucasian teachers to play a greater role in the “disciplining” of the *nisei* population in the camp, some teachers refused and insisted that they are here to serve as teachers, not to carry out administrative policies at the bequest of WRA officials.⁸⁵

Camp education involved a cruel irony. Teachers had the awkward charge of presenting the ideals of democracy and civil rights to a group of students who were confined on all four sides by barbed wire, while students were forced to rationalize their predicament while swallowing the propaganda of a United States government that was holding them as prisoners.

Mrs. Eleanor Sekerak, a Caucasian WRA teacher who taught at Topaz, remarked, “I never ceased to have a lump in my throat when classes recited the Pledge of Allegiance, especially the phrase, ‘liberty and justice for all.’”⁸⁶ Mrs. May K. Sasaki, who was interned at Minidoka as an elementary student, recalled that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, “[made] me a little-teary eyed ‘cause I think of the irony of learning the Pledge of Allegiance while being

⁸³ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 31.

⁸⁴ Densho Archives, “Henry Miyatake Interview II Segment 7,” ID: denshovh-mhenry-02-0007.

⁸⁵ Densho Archives, “Mits Takahashi Interview Segment 18,” ID: denshovh-tmits-01-0018.

⁸⁶ Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, “A Teacher at Topaz,” in *Only What We Could Carry*, 133.

behind barbed wire fences in the camps.” Her earliest drawings for art classes were filled with barracks and watchtowers, since they were the first things that she saw when she looked around her “home.”⁸⁷

In the context of racial confinement, essay topics like “American Democracy and What It Means to Me” were cruelly ironic, and many students found it too difficult to respond. After one student submitted his honest opinions of the camp and a frank summary of all its negative aspects, he was asked to rewrite the paper or receive an F for the course. He did not rewrite the paper, and ended up being expelled from the school.⁸⁸ In another essay composition, a teacher edited a student’s thoughts from, “Why then were citizens of Japanese ancestry removed from their homes and placed behind barbed wire?” to “Why then were citizens of Japanese ancestry removed from their homes and placed in relocation centers?” As an addendum to the change, the teacher asked the student to instead “rationalize and arrive at a conclusion whereby you can reconcile this seemingly undemocratic act as an act of Americanism.”⁸⁹ Sometimes the underlying conflict between the Japanese students and the camp administration manifested itself openly. At Heart Mountain, a *nisei* student openly shouted in frustration, “Why did they do this to us? Why weren’t they prepared for us when we came to the camps? Why were we treated like animals?” The visibly flustered Caucasian teacher retorted, “We were not prepared for Pearl Harbor, were we?”⁹⁰

One WRA educator described the ultimate aim of the primary and secondary education as to create “projectiles of democracy into the maelstrom of postwar adjustment.”⁹¹ The camp

⁸⁷ Densho Archives, “May K. Sasaki Interview Segment 22,” ID: denshovh-smay-01-0022.

⁸⁸ Densho Archives, “Henry Miyatake Interview II Segment 16 and 18,” ID: denshovh-mhenry-02-0016 and denshovh-mhenry-02-0018.

⁸⁹ Densho Archives, “Kats Kunitsugu – Paul Tsuneishi Interview Segment 1,” ID: denshovh-kkats_g-01-0001.

⁹⁰ Thomas James, *Exile Within*, 62.

⁹¹ Erica Harth, “Democracy for Beginners,” in *Last Witnesses*, 196.

schools would explore the principles of democracy and peruse the language of the Constitution, so that pupils could “accept and fulfill their responsibilities as citizens.”⁹² At the same time, it is worthy to note that although the *nisei* were all American citizens by birth, they were stripped of rights with their *issei* parents, who were prohibited by law from acquiring citizenship. Therefore, this contradiction understandably caused many *nisei* children to question their belief in the American government and the education system that was imposed upon them at camp. For example, this degree of ambivalence about the status of their citizenship and their host country would come into sharp focus in the debate surrounding the *nisei* draft of 1943, when the *nisei* male population was sharply divided about whether to volunteer for service in the US Army. A contingent of *nisei* men understandably argued that it would be morally degrading to volunteer for a country that had so blatantly violated their civil rights, while another group viewed the opportunity as a way to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to the nation. This picture mirrors the outlook of the *nisei* population at camp towards the established schooling system – some openly viewed it with contempt and aired their opinions in compositions and comments at school, while other students tolerated the frustrating conditions with a measure of patience and resilience in hopes of better days to come. The undemocratic conditions in which these students were held inadvertently provided the most memorable lesson in American democracy.

⁹² War Relocation Authority, “Education 30.3, Techniques Objective III Secondary School,” National Archives, *WRA Handbook*, Record Group 210, Box 31, Entry 1.

CHAPTER 3

Camp-Organized Adult Education Programs: A Notable Example of Administration-Internee Collaboration

Adult Education programs were a valuable addition to camp activities that gave adults a diversion after work. In contrast to its control over primary and secondary programs, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) did not tightly regulate adult programs. These programs relied upon camp residents who contributed their talents and skills. Unlike the uneven teaching quality in primary and secondary schooling, qualified instructors with advanced degrees or years of teaching experience often taught the adult courses. In return for allowing and sponsoring the adult programs, the WRA required English and Americanization classes for adults. Although some adults struggled to reconcile the realities of internment with the ideals presented in these classes, the courses offered a valuable opportunity for *issei* adults to learn more about the United States as they prepared for relocation after internment. Finally, the high degree of self-governance evident in the planning and staffing of Adult Education programs reflected a rare internee voice in community affairs that were otherwise tightly regulated.

The War Relocation Authority established education programs for adults alongside primary and secondary programs from the onset of internment. Before internment, working adults rarely took courses. These camp courses were an innovative step. In an administrative notice sent out by the WRA headquarters to program directors, the WRA authorities defined the purpose of adult education as the “rehabilitation of evacuees into American life.” For successful

integration into American communities, internees would require knowledge of the English language and a deep understanding of the mechanisms of American community relationships.⁹³

In a further bulletin, the WRA defined the concrete goals of the Adult Education programs in greater detail. There were three principal categories for classes: preparation for relocation, self-improvement courses, and leisurely pursuits. Preparation for relocation was the “primary purpose of the Adult Education program,” while the auxiliary goals addressed the personal interests and wellbeing of internees. Common Adult Education classes can be broadly categorized into these three types – for instance, English education classes and Americanization classes prepared internees for relocation. The WRA emphasized English fluency and awareness of democratic values among the internees as a prerequisite skill for relocation. Sewing, cooking, and childcare fell into the second category. These homemaking skills bettered the daily lives of the interned population and were regarded as valuable skills, even if not directly related to relocation. Finally, activities such as flower arranging, brush painting, and music were in the third division. These pursuits simply reduced the drudgery of life at camp.⁹⁴

Although WRA sought to organize these activities and went as far to include Adult Education in educational committees and seminars hosted under the auspices of National Headquarters, the staffing and the organization of these programs were left to camp administrators and internees. Staff and instructors were drawn almost completely from the interned populations, except for certain English and Americanization teachers. As such, Adult Education programs took on a life of their own and the scope of the program differed widely across centers. Topaz in Central Utah had the most extensive Adult Education program of any

⁹³ War Relocation Authority, “Administrative Notice No. 125,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

⁹⁴ War Relocation Authority, “Adult education: Committee Report and Recommendations,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

WRA relocation center because of the zeal and the dedication of the camp administration and program staff.

Adult Education at Topaz was divided into five departments—Basic English, Sewing, Commercial Sewing, Music, and Art—along with an extensive Evening School that offered classes in practical subjects like shorthand, mathematics, and first aid. Ten administrative personnel and more than one hundred teachers drawn from the internees constituted the staff and faculty of the program. These classes were extremely popular, with attendance in the several hundreds for most programs. Classes were held day and night to accommodate the varied schedules of the internees. Registration figures for the week of April 10, 1943 recorded a total enrollment of 4,485 registered program spaces (1,748 males, 2,737 females), with an attendance of 80.1% (3,591).⁹⁵ These students were distributed among 224 classes and 213 individual lessons.⁹⁶

Although teaching was initially hindered by a severe lack of equipment, internee interest in these programs remained high and encouraged camp staff. For example, although negotiations between *nisei* teachers and the camp administration to establish a Basic English department began when Topaz was opening in October 1942, officials were forced to postpone these programs due the lack of stoves, tables, and benches in the barrack serving as the classroom. In the Sewing Department, students waited for the WRA to send sewing machines. Sewing classes finally commenced in November 1942, but the students were standing at the sewing tables while doing needlework because there were no stools. When the Music Department requested pianos from the WRA, the administration was able to comply. It sent seven pianos to Topaz, but only

⁹⁵ These figures do not represent individuals, but rather program spaces, as one individual may opt to sign up for multiple classes.

⁹⁶ “Adult education Program: Director Dr. Laverne Bane, Topaz, Utah, May 1st 1943” Pamphlet, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

four could be used for Adult Education purposes while the others were distributed to churches and schools. This constraint led to stringent practice schedules, in which beginning students could only practice for two 15-minute periods, intermediate for two 30-minute periods, and advanced for two 45-minute periods a week. The Music director conceded, “Under these unfavorable conditions, normal progress cannot be expected. In order to insure [sic] a minimum amount of progress, students are instructed how to go about practicing so as to get maximum results from their limited practice time.”⁹⁷ Given the wartime shortages, it was notable that the WRA managed to procure pianos and sewing machines for Topaz, attesting to the goodwill shown by camp administration to budding Adult Education initiatives.

Despite material shortages, teachers with exceptional credentials taught in the Adult Education programs. The head of the Art Department, Chiura Obata, was an eminent artist in Japan and an art instructor at the University of California prior to internment. In the Music Department, seven out of twelve instructors possessed advanced degrees in music, and all had prior teaching experience in their areas of expertise and instruction. Thus, despite the poor conditions of the facilities and the difficult conditions that these teachers were forced to work under, adult students in these programs studied under highly qualified instructors. The evidence suggests that students enjoyed this experience. The attendance figures for subjects that required more personal attention and individual instruction show that the internees liked the exposure and the challenges that these intimate classes afforded. The Artificial Flower Arranging Department where they created flowers out of crepe paper and wire given the scarcity of fresh flowers at Topaz, and the Sewing Department recorded attendance rates of 87.9%⁹⁸ and 76.5%⁹⁹, respectively.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ 321 registered, 282 attended.

A capstone in the Adult Education program at Topaz was the Adult Education Show held on the first weekend of June 1944, which demonstrated the variety and the scope of the programs for the adult camp population. Administrators expected all the Adult Education classes to participate in the exhibit – including newly developed classes such as shellcraft, lapidary, artificial flowers, women’s dresses and suits, knitted wear, leathercraft, flower arrangements, and oil painting. Objects made by the classes were on view in a display section on Saturday in the Topaz Auditorium. On Sunday, the exhibition ground transformed into a community show with live performances, including songs and recitations by the adult English classes, oil painting demonstrations, musical performances from the music school, and a live fashion show conducted by the sewing program.¹⁰¹

The weekend show was a resounding success – around 6,800 people saw the still-life exhibits, and about 2,000 people were present for the live performances on Sunday. Considering the camp population was about 8,500 at this time, nearly three-quarters of the entire camp attended the shows.¹⁰² The Japanese section of the *Topaz Times* included a detailed description and analysis of the value of the Adult Education Show. The Japanese section was written in Japanese for the benefit of the *issei* population, and translated in the English portions of the newspaper. Although brief English captions were required for all the articles, there is little indication that these sections were scrutinized by the camp administration, and the reporting tended to be more frank and direct compared to the English translations. The Japanese reporting on the Adult Education Show provides a colorful picture of the way the internees viewed Adult Education in the context of their internment.

⁹⁹ 980 registered, 750 attended.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Adult education Classes Slate Big Weekend Show,” *Topaz Times*, May 31, 1944.

¹⁰² “Large Crowds Attend Adult education Show,” *Topaz Times*, June 7, 1944.

Various administrators, including the Topaz Project Director, L. T. Hoffman and a visiting dignitary from Washington D.C. attended the live show on Sunday, and were “surprised” by the “elegance in artistic thought” that originated from the “imprisoned Japanese in such barren wasteland,” the newspaper reported. Certainly, “art is the quickest path in establishing relationships between humankind” and the “Americans engendered respect for the superior skill demonstrated by the Japanese after seeing the works of art,” the reporter commented. It is clear that the reporting scarcely contained the ebullient pride of the interned journalist at the dogged persistence, or *gaman*, of the internees. Further, he was “touched by the variety of art shown and the progress of improvement after seeing the exhibits. It is encouraging that even though we are living in a barren desert, the days are not being wasted and that it is being invested into beneficial and noble pastimes, as well as the improvement of one’s character.”¹⁰³ Even in the face of harsh living conditions, the internees were able to create works of beauty and value. Importantly, the event brought together the various departments of the Adult Education program and demonstrated to program directors and the camp community the value of education.

Adult Education teachers were selected entirely from the camp population, as the WRA did not have additional resources to secure Caucasian teachers for the adult program. Recruitment occurred largely from local efforts. At Minidoka, guided by the expectation that “all [adult] courses must originate from the interests of the residents on the project,” a survey was distributed to internees over the age of eighteen. The survey contained a list of a hundred suggested courses, and it requested eligible adults to indicate the courses that they would be interested in attending or might help lead. The completed survey forms were collected by the block managers, and collated by the administrative staff of the Adult Education department. Approximately 4,000 forms were distributed to families and 950 forms were returned. Younger

¹⁰³ “Japanese Part Section 1,” *Topaz Times*, June 10, 1944.

residents were interested in courses such as shorthand, typing, bookkeeping, shop, drafting, radio, and electricity. The interests of the older residents shifted towards Americanization, sewing, designing, cooking, and craftwork. The areas that attracted both age groups were business and industrial classes. At the beginning of 1943, the camp offered a total of 46 class periods in 25 subject areas, taught by a total of 27 instructors. Remarkably, all of the instructors teaching technical courses possessed advanced degrees in their respective subjects. This mirrors the situation at Topaz and attests to the high quality of the instruction in the adult programs and the skill sets of the internees.¹⁰⁴

Two elements in the Adult Education program require greater analysis: English instruction and Americanization classes. Classes in both areas flourished at Topaz, and every camp that had an Adult Education program contained some variation of these courses. Internees took advantage of the English classes to prepare for relocation and to better communicate with their English-speaking children, while Americanization classes helped *issei* internees anticipate life after internment. The English and Americanization classes were remarkable because they were encouraged by the Caucasian camp administration but also enjoyed widespread support among the Japanese camp population.

The Basic English department was the first subdivision created within the Adult Education program at Topaz (just one month following the opening of the camp). This reflected internee demand for English and WRA support for English instruction. The question of language instruction was especially difficult for the *issei* population. Living in Japan towns allowed few opportunities to engage English-language cultures and the generational disconnect with their children exacerbated their alienation from the English language. Strategies and

¹⁰⁴ “Minidoka Adult education Bulletin: March 1943, Director J. J. Fogarty,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 2.

techniques described in the education section of the WRA Handbook called for teachers to develop “more sympathy and willingness to help *issei* learn English,” including “assistance and encouragement in the writing of letters in English by parents to sons and daughters” in an attempt to bridge the generational and cultural gap.¹⁰⁵

The WRA also advocated English instruction to reduce misunderstandings between this large population of Japanese immigrants and a suspicious, even hostile, American public. Toyo Suyemoto, the director of Basic English in the Adult Education department at the Topaz Relocation Center, believed that miscommunication between the mainstream American population and the Japanese multiplied under the stresses and demands of the wartime emergency. English courses were intended to “assist in the assimilation...into American life” and were “essential toward achieving a happier life in America” for the *issei*.¹⁰⁶

Finally, English instruction anticipated an end to internment, in which the *issei* would have to settle in new communities and obtain jobs. “Skill in the use of the English language will aid in business transactions and will be an important factor in community acceptance and approval,” promised one internal memo.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, teachers were exhorted to construct practical lessons: “teach recognized trade terminology so that the trainee will be able to speak the language of the tradesmen when he takes a job.”¹⁰⁸

The *nisei* English teachers found that the *issei* population took language classes for parallel reasons – students wanted to communicate with their children in the Army, to negotiate

¹⁰⁵ “English for Adults – Techniques.” *WRA Handbook*: Education 30.3, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

¹⁰⁶ Toyo Suyemoto and Nori Ikeda. “Report of the Basic English Division of the Adult education Department.” *Adult education Program: Director Dr. Laverne Bane, Topaz, Utah, May 1st, 1943*, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

¹⁰⁷ “Adult education and Orientation Memorandum No. 3: Improving the Use of English by Center Residents.” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 2.

¹⁰⁸ “English for Adults – Techniques.” *WRA Handbook*: Education 30.3, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 31, Box 1.

the dominant culture, to keep up with the news on the radio, and to secure better jobs in the future.¹⁰⁹ Prior to the internment, many *issei* wanted to learn English to connect to their children, but often were unable to balance classes with work and other obligations. Mine Kaneko recognized the need for her children to learn English. She also wanted to learn English to understand their slang; however, she never had time for the classes before relocation.¹¹⁰ Yukiko Furuta, an *issei* living in Orange County prior to internment, explained: “everyone was so busy farming that [we] did not have time to learn English systematically. [We] just learned it from [our] neighbors whenever it was necessary. [We] picked up English little by little.”¹¹¹ Paradoxically, the relocation centers often provided the first opportunity for the *issei* to take organized English classes. Many first generation students used English instruction to focus on futures after internment. One student made an even more poignant demand upon his instructors: “I read English; I write English; but when I speak, I sound awful. Will someone teach me how to say the words?”¹¹²

A 1944 War Relocation Authority pamphlet, titled “Introducing English to Adults,” outlined specific strategies for teaching English to an interned population with limited proficiency. First, the report acknowledged that English learning was especially difficult for the *issei* because of the insecurities caused by prejudice from English-speaking individuals. Thus, it called for less rigidly structured classroom instruction in favor of a wide variety of classroom activities that emphasized full participation and interaction. The teaching methods suggest a

¹⁰⁹ Toyo Suyemoto and Nori Ikeda. “Report of the Basic English Division of the Adult education Department.” *Adult education Program: Director Dr. Laverne Bane, Topaz, Utah, May 1st, 1943*, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

¹¹⁰ “Issei Experience in Orange County, California, O.H. 1760: Mine Yabuki Kaneko,” 16. Honorable Stephen K. Tamura Orange County Japanese American Oral History Project, available on University of California Calisphere JARDA Archives. Last accessed May 2011.

¹¹¹ “Issei Experience in Orange County, California, O.H. 1760: Yukiko Furuta,” 89. Honorable Stephen K. Tamura Orange County Japanese American Oral History Project, available on University of California Calisphere JARDA Archives. Last accessed May 2011.

¹¹² “For Publication.” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 16, Box 379.

threefold strategy: a natural assimilation into English, emphasizing proper enunciation, and applying language to situations in daily life.¹¹³

Adult English instruction, therefore, used the “direct method” of language instruction, as opposed to the “grammar-translation” method. This approach employed the vocabulary that the *issei* passively acquired from listening to the conversations of their children and put it into practical use. Many of the *issei* could read and write basic English, but lacked sufficient familiarity with the language to “think” in English. As such, enunciation and proper pronunciation were the keys to making the *issei* understood in common social situations, and a focus on phonics and making difficult consonant sounds formed key elements of English instruction. Toyo Suyemoto, who taught English at Topaz, noted the difficulty that first generation English-learners had distinguishing between different English consonant sounds: “they were not used to tongue and lip movements in distinguishing *v* from *b*, *r* to *l*, *s* from *th*, nor adept at cutting off consonants at the end of a word.”¹¹⁴ Lastly, the language instruction was geared towards what was needed in daily, practical situations. This allowed each student to directly transfer his or her knowledge from the classroom to their extracurricular lives, reinforcing the classroom lessons.

Although these lessons were particularly well planned and well organized, some *issei* had difficulty keeping up with the instruction. One student admitted to struggling: “[the classes were] harder than I expected. I am one of the poorest student in my class...when I attend in my English class, I am shy and coward like a sheep which are drawing to the slaughterhouse. When the lesson is over, I feel myself all the time heavy sweat wet my back. It seems to me to reach

¹¹³ “Introducing English to Adults.” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 16, Box 379.

¹¹⁴ Toyo Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance*, 124.

my goal in English is quite long away.”¹¹⁵ Such frustrations were apparently common.

Suyemoto recalled a classroom incident where “one woman, more determined than the others, tried again, but with no better effect. She paused, shook her head, and remarked in Japanese, ‘Teacher, I cannot do it.’”¹¹⁶

Despite these challenges, internees attended classes in impressive numbers. Adult Education Program reports, forwarded from the camps to WRA national headquarters in early 1944, recorded Adult English attendance rates of 84% at Heart Mountain, 77% at Rohwer, and 77% at Topaz. Interestingly, women were 75% of the registered student population at Heart Mountain, 66% at Rohwer, and 90% at Topaz.¹¹⁷ Women were generally more inclined to attend classes where communication and participation were emphasized. The fact that men often worked in heavy labor and agriculture drew them toward vocational classes that offered opportunities to learn or improve trade skills (such as woodworking and machinery), but they were also less likely to take any classes, possibly due to the larger share of men working physically draining labor-intensive jobs during the daytime.

English also dominated the adult education system. By October 1944 a report from headquarters on attendance at eight relocation centers (Topaz, Colorado River, Gila River, Granada, Heart Mountain, Manzanar, Minidoka, and Rohwer) documented a total of 8,660 adult education spaces of which 2,187 were assigned to English instruction. English instruction was the largest field (25%, second was flower arranging at 18%) in adult education.¹¹⁸ In short, English classes were the most popular option for adults enrolled in relocation center courses.

¹¹⁵ Shoji Nagumo, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 222.

¹¹⁶ Toyo Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance*, 124.

¹¹⁷ National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 16, Box 377. Detailed statistical data are as follows – Heart Mountain: 119 men and 366 women enrolled, 405 attended; Rohwer: 52 men and 103 women enrolled, 120 attended; Topaz: 23 men and 204 women enrolled, 174 attended.

¹¹⁸ “Adult Education Summary, October 6, 1944.” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 16, Box 379. Detailed statistical data are as follows – 2187 enrolled English spaces, 1536 enrolled Flower Arrangement spaces, 8660 total enrolled class spaces.

These figures confirm Toyo Suyemoto's observation about the benefits of English instruction to the *issei*: "knowledge of English is the cornerstone for achieving the maximum pleasures and benefits of life in America...these students are aware of the need to be conversant in the language of the country of which they are a part...they are taking advantage of this chance to fulfill this need by attending the Adult English classes."¹¹⁹

The War Relocation Authority accomplished one of its major objectives through the English classes. The centers provided a controlled environment where an entire cross-section of an ethnic population could be exposed to language instruction that they lacked or found inaccessible in the segregated Japanese communities of the west coast. Internees later reported that this instruction eased their transitions into American towns after relocation. It also helped to advance the WRA's goal of saturating internees in "American culture" and encouraging them to explore "American heritage." It proved to be one of the most important elements of the Adult Education programs across the camps.

The WRA mandated Americanization classes at relocation centers to supplement language instruction with practical opportunities for using English. General Americanization classes focused on the civics, government, and geography of the United States, and were intended to ease the resettlement process for internees following relocation. The course description at Minidoka provides a picture of the material presented in these classes.

The aim of Americanization classes was to expose adults to "the average American community, its schools, health problems, [and] industries." The Americanization classes also sought to introduce internees to the basics of English grammar by establishing the curriculum on a series of short English primers. Instruction emphasized proper pronunciation and English

¹¹⁹ Toyo Suyemoto and Nori Ikeda. "Report of the Basic English Division of the Adult education Department." *Adult education Program: Director Dr. Laverne Bane, Topaz, Utah, May 1st, 1943*, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

writing, and as the instruction level increased in difficulty more challenging writing assignments and more stringent grammar standards were enforced. Finally, at the Advanced level, students were no longer presented with English grammar manuals and textbooks. Instead, classes were focused on current events, American history, and biographies of figures in American history including Columbus, Franklin, Hamilton, Jackson, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Washington.¹²⁰

The WRA claimed that Americanization classes were well received in the relocation camps. Minidoka “residents indicated an overwhelming interest in Americanization.”¹²¹ However, residents at Tule Lake Relocation Center did not demonstrate the same enthusiasm. In fact, the camp administration was so concerned about the low turnout rate that they hired a community analyst to study the poor enrollments in their Americanization and Relocation classes. Tule Lake was notable because it was the relocation center where dissidents and “troublemakers” from the other centers were sent, so it was not surprising that classes heralding American values attracted little interest. Nonetheless, the challenges at Tule Lake experienced shed light on the difficulties of imposing English and Americanization classes on groups that were hesitant or even hostile towards the attending political and social values. Recalcitrant students could find plenty to complain about in the poor resources and uneven instruction in these courses. These difficulties were evident across all camps to a degree, but much more concentrated at Tule Lake.

Administrators intended the Americanization classes for the *issei* and the *kibei* (American-born Japanese who returned to Japan for their schooling), but individuals in these demographic groups indicated little interest in attending the classes. They complained of physical discomfort, a lack of qualified instructors, and insufficient understanding of the subject

¹²⁰ National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

¹²¹ Ibid.

content. As these first generation internees were often field laborers who were accustomed to long hours of hard labor, the physical discomfort of sitting for two hours on hard benches in barracks that were unheated proved unbearable. In addition, there was a lack of effective *nisei* instructors who could carry on bilingual instruction and command the respect of the *issei*. Finally, the fear of foreign concepts and even apathy towards the course material also dissuaded some *issei* from participating in Americanization.¹²²

The proposal suggested that a successful Americanization program had to provide adequate learning facilities for the students, use a bilingual teaching staff who commanded the respect of the adult population, and generate sufficient interest among the *issei* audience. When evaluating successful Americanization programs at relocation centers, one must recognize that the program is very much a community affair – block managers and persons located at the centers of trust in the camps had to know about and publicize the program. The program aims and titles needed to be rebranded to appeal to the *issei* generation. Bland titles such as “Americanization” and “American History” could be relabeled as “Understanding Your Child and His World” and “The World Your Children Face” to generate more interest among the *issei*.¹²³

Interestingly, Tule Lake adopted these suggestions and made several changes to the Americanization program. Mini-sessions titled “Understanding America” were initially incorporated into the Adult English classes, as one-hour seminars. The aim was to give the students already taking Adult English a taste of the Americanization classes, and to get them interested enough in the material to enroll in the full-length versions of the classes. Officials distributed posters advertising these seminars in the camps in both Japanese and English.

¹²² “The Adult Education in Relocation Centers as It Applies to Assimilation and Acculturation: December 31, 1943,” National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 6, Box 2.

¹²³ Ibid.

Following the suggestions from the fact-finding report, they renamed Americanization classes “Understanding the World of Your *Nisei* Sons and Daughters.” Community leaders then announced the classes with religious leaders and block leaders in an effort to promote publicity for the classes.¹²⁴

Coordinators struggled with getting *issei* internees to welcome the prospects of learning about America and to understand the relevance of these topics to their lives. Classes had to pique the interests of the internees to get them to enroll. To address this issue, Topaz Relocation Center began publishing snippets of Americanization courses in its camp newspapers.

On January 23, 1943, editors published the first “Adult Education Supplement” in the *Topaz Times*, a Japanese-language page in the camp newspaper prepared by the Adult Education Department. This publication focused on specific aspects of Americanization, such as Western values, customs of the people, and American places. The schedules for the “Americanization Study Seminars” that were so popularly received earlier were published in these inserts, and these classes continued to be successful until the closing of the camp. Conversational English transliterated into Japanese *katakana* script were included for the benefit of the *issei* adults (phrases such as “Good morning” become “gutto mooningu.” As time went on, the supplements included topics as far-ranging as Western etiquette¹²⁵, American history¹²⁶, biographies of the United States presidents¹²⁷, and even the famed Calvin Coolidge “you lose” story included as “American anecdotes.”¹²⁸ These snippets of American culture and trivia supplemented the

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ “A Man Takes Off His Hat” (a primer on the occasions when it is required by etiquette that a man removes his hat), *Topaz Times*, May 15, 1943.

¹²⁶ “Short Stories from American History: San Francisco,” *Topaz Times*, January 8, 1944.

¹²⁷ “Americans Whom Americans Revere: Andrew Jackson,” *Topaz Times*, June 5, 1943.

¹²⁸ “American Anecdotes: Calvin Coolidge,” *Topaz Times*, October 9, 1943. In the original story, the bet was that one could not get President Coolidge to speak more than three words. However, this did not translate into Japanese nicely, so the story was modified into a bet that one could not get him to speak for more than five minutes.

Americanization lessons disseminated in the classes and served as successful advertisements to other adults about the benefits of attending these courses.

The format for these Americanization supplements usually consisted of a handwritten Japanese translation of a lengthy article, often about some aspect of American culture or society. This article was supplemented on the same page with a series of smaller stories, and the Americanization lecture schedule for the week. The May 29, 1943 issue began with an extensive biography of the Supreme Court Justice John Marshall, followed by a case study in American burglary laws.¹²⁹ By producing these Americanization supplements for the camp newspaper, the education staff could reach a wider population, as internees eagerly followed the camp newspapers for information and entertainment. The convenient lecture schedule located on the supplement page also alerted residents of upcoming classes, so that interested adults could drop in. The classes at Topaz were held daily from Monday to Thursday, at 7:30 PM. These Educational Supplements continued through 1944 when they quietly disappeared.

Adult Education provided a creative outlet for the internees to channel their energies and their frustrations into productive activities. The isolated and segregated nature of the camps made it convenient for internees to study subjects of interest, likely prompting a greater attendance than if these classes were offered in pre-internment Little Tokyos. The self-directed quality of the programs allowed internees a strong sense of self-governance as groups of interested individuals mobilized to teach classes, a precious right in the WRA-controlled internment camp. On the administrative side, the WRA authorities were happy to see the implementation of English and Americanization courses that propagated the government's political and strategic aims. This in turn led the WRA to accept and encourage the growth of the Adult Education programs. Therefore, Adult Education presented a notable situation where the interests of the

¹²⁹ Americanization Supplement, *Topaz Times*, May 29, 1943.

administration and the camp community aligned, and stands as one of the more remarkable elements of camp community life.

Afterword

Going home,
Feeling cheated,
Gripping my daughter's hand,
I tell her we're leaving
Without emotion.¹³⁰

As the war drew to a close, the relocation centers closed between 1944 and 1945 and internees spread out across the United States. Given \$25 and a train ticket to the destination of their choice, internees took one last glance at the relocation camp that had been their home for the past three years and never looked back. Although some internees were understandably bitter about internment, others enrolled in colleges that were willing to take Japanese-American students and worked to reverse the negative perceptions of Japanese Americans. A student at Washington University gave a talk before the local Methodist church, and “was amazed to see how many of them (doctors, business men, and school teachers), never realized our true situation...[one] man told me [to talk to] his United States Senator who didn't even know whether we were citizens.”¹³¹ Another student resolved, “We've got to combat this racial feeling...any group in trouble finds it so much easier to shove the blame onto some other minority group, and we are as guilty as any other racial stock. What a farce!”¹³² Others enrolled in the military to demonstrate that skin color was not a factor in determining loyalty to the United States. A *nisei* soldier serving on the front lines of Italy wrote back to his parents that, “I am more convinced that we've done the right thing [by volunteering for the draft] in spite of what has happened in the past – America is a damn good country and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”¹³³

¹³⁰ Shizue Iwatsuki, quoted in *Only What We Could Carry*, 388.

¹³¹ Letter by Juro Shintani, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 2.

¹³² Letter by Kenji Okuda, National Archives, Record Group 210, Entry 2, Box 2.

¹³³ George Saito, “Letter to Father,” in *Only What We Could Carry*, 375. George died in action three weeks after writing this letter.

In July 2, 1948, Congress passed the Japanese American Claims Act, which allowed Japanese Americans to file claims for property loss and damages caused by evacuation. On February 19, 1976, President Ford officially rescinded Executive Order 9066, calling the internment of Japanese Americans a “national mistake.” Finally, on November 2, 1989, President George Bush signed Public Law 101-162, providing reparation payments to internment survivors and issuing an apology to all affected by the internment process.

I embarked on this project due to an interest in Japanese-American internment developed during the Seminar in Historical Methods course in Spring 2010, which required a formal research paper. I wanted to delve more deeply into this topic after noting that the Japanese internment was a subject frequently glossed over in history textbooks. After reading dozens of camp-published newspapers, I realized that these internment centers were vibrant communities filled with internee-driven activities operating under the constraints of the WRA. Thus, I started looking for examples in which internees were able to assert a degree of autonomy despite the limitations placed upon them. Education emerged as one of these examples.

Education was interesting in the context of internment because it resembled a tug-of-war between the WRA and the internees. The WRA wanted Americanization and relocation classes across the curriculum to all ages, while the internees wanted to organize an education program that at least somewhat reflected pre-internment conditions for their children. Many Japanese *nisei* ended up teaching in camp primary and secondary schools due to staffing shortages, and the Adult Education programs were almost completely internee-operated. Thus, Japanese Americans were able to assert a degree of autonomy in both areas that was surprising under the constraints of a government operated relocation center.

In considering primary and secondary education alongside Adult Education, the most challenging aspect was balancing and identifying primary sources. A significant amount of primary sources exists for primary and secondary education in the form of oral histories and WRA records, since many of the children who went through these camp schools have been interviewed in recent years through efforts to preserve internment history. However, reconstructing Adult Education was challenging because of the scarcity in oral history and memoirs, since most students were already older in age at the time of internment. The WRA files provide a detailed picture of how English and Americanization classes were run, and memoirs from teachers who taught in Adult Education complete the story. Camp newspapers also provide a glimpse into how these Adult Education programs were received, although the reporting was often limited. For example, it was slightly disappointing that it was not possible to fully assess the reception of music and art programs for adults because of the limits of the sources.

A similar divide existed in collecting post-internment stories. Many of the relocated college students and young people wrote letters or published memoirs of their internment experiences, but the data was scarce for the *issei* adults who settled throughout the country following internment. I do not believe that the information is unavailable; it is just difficult to obtain under the time and resources available for an undergraduate thesis. A detailed search of several archives is required. *Rafu Shimpo*, the daily Japanese-language newspaper of the Los Angeles community, would be one archive that would be interesting to look into, for example.

Other challenges included the broad scope and characteristics of these internment centers. I drew heavily from Topaz Relocation Center accounts, but it is important to realize that the education provided at each relocation center was different due to the availability of staffing and resources. I believe that Topaz offered a representative view of education across relocation

centers, but it was certainly not the only experience. The same goes for the perceptions of Japanese internees on the effect of education on their post-internment lives. It would not be accurate to say that the WRA-mandated Americanization programs simply caused all Japanese to view the United States government with added hatred, since some used these classes to further consider their obligations and civic roles as American citizens. What these English and Americanization classes *did* do, however, was to lead Japanese Americans to think more deeply about the meaning of American citizenship and the ideals of democracy and equal justice during an era where both were being threatened.

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Chris Su
May 2011

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